

Connect Charter School Student, Parent and Staff Interviews

Executive Summary by Chris Gilmour – June 17, 2019

The tenth annual superintendent interviews of parents, students, and staff members were conducted over several weeks in the spring of 2019 as a component of the ongoing school evaluation process. 42 parents were interviewed between March and May, 2019, mostly during student-led conferences. In May and June, grades 4 to 9 had 3 student representatives per class interviewed as a grade. (24 classes – 12 students per grade). I was pleased that Dr. Phil Butterfield was able to join me these sessions. As well, individual meetings were held with 38 teachers and support staff. The feedback generated from parents and students focused on two main 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?*" Staff were asked to reflect on the 6 goals identified in our Annual Education Results Report to guide their feedback (listed below).

Goal 1: Promote exemplary learning, teaching and leading through a disposition of inquiry.

Goal 2: Enhance learning and teaching through the appropriate and effective use of technology and maintain an intentional, authentic and innovative perspective in the use of technology.

Goal 3: Engage students in meaningful real-life learning activities in a variety of rich learning environments.

Goal 4: Provide environmental, outdoor, and global education learning opportunities for students to experience and appreciate the world outside of the classroom and to develop social, leadership and stewardship skills.

Goal 5: Foster a culture of collaboration and caring relationships of mutual respect with students, staff members and parents sharing a passion for learning together and from others, in the classroom, within the school and beyond.

Goal 6: Nurture thriving classrooms and other learning environments where teachers are informed by research and where students and teachers explore and develop deep understanding as active researchers.

Common themes have been identified for this executive report in two categories: What we are doing well and areas for further consideration.

Key Findings:

What we are doing well:

1. Our overall community is very pleased with the quality of teaching and administrative staff at Connect.
2. We have a great school that is focused on it's charter and supporting it's students. The quality of education is high at Connect.
3. The focus on inquiry is appreciated and is helping our students become critical thinkers that understand their world.

Areas for consideration:

1. Our school does a good job working with its stakeholders. We need to re-focus on supporting our teachers in the classroom with more administrative presence.
2. The composition of our classrooms is becoming more and more diverse and heterogeneous. As a school, we need to focus our learning opportunities on how we can best support these environments.
3. Inquiry- Many of us have developed our own understanding of what this is, how it works and what it means. As a school, we need to revisit it's roots, develop a common understanding and communicate this with our staff, students and parents.

Student Interview Responses- Key Themes:

1. We have a great teaching staff at Connect.

- The teachers are welcoming and supportive
- It's ok to ask questions and teachers really help us understand not just what, but why we are learning
- I like learning at Connect. It's fun.
- The projects we are asked to do are hands-on, fun and we get a lot of choice.
- Our teachers care about us.

2. Our programming is excellent

- Students appreciate the choices for electives
- We are never just sitting around. Learning is fun at Connect.
- We really like learning outside.
- We like how experts are brought into the school to help us develop a better, deeper understanding of some things we are studying.
- Students are respected and we feel like our opinions matter.
- We are happy the teachers do not assign a lot of homework if we get our work done in class.
- We are happy that our teachers give us choice in how they assess our work.
- We like the choice of electives. The teachers are creative.

3. Outdoor learning experiences

- The trips really helped me make friends in my class early in the school year.
- We like learning outside of school. The teachers do a great job providing students with learning experiences in different places, with experts.
- The class overnight trips help us become more independent and allow us to make friends.
- The teachers link our trips to learning in the classroom.

4. Leadership opportunities

- We like the different opportunities we get- mentoring, Fort Steele, family groups, Camp Sweet, Bamfield.
- We are given a lot of freedom of choice and our teachers trust us.
- We like how open the school is to feedback from students
- Our trips provide a lot of opportunities for us to gain independence.

Areas for further consideration:

- Longer recess? Longer lunch?
- Half-day Fridays?

- Could we offer language classes?
- More sports teams and clubs, especially at for the younger grades
- Can we update our webpage and it's look?
- Air conditioning?
- Inquiry into actions: build boxes around the old (white) water fountains and put microwaves on top! Students need to be able to heat their lunches.
- Fix the tarmac on the east side of the school and the basketball nets. Can we get a third basketball net?
- Cell phone policy. Students should be able to use their cell phone before the morning bell and at lunch.
- Could we spread out the field experiences throughout the year instead of grouping them together in June?
- Revisit the school calendar- start later and get rid of the fall break.
- Could we teach keyboarding?
- We like looping with our teachers.
- Older students should be able to leave campus at lunch.

Parent Interview Responses-Key Themes:

1. *Connect Charter School is a great school for my child (children)*

- We are very fortunate to have outstanding teachers.
- The variety of programs is great at the school.
- The balance in the number of trips this year was much better.
- "I chose Connect because it fit her. It's been a great fit. I like the way she learns; its different than other public schools. I love the outdoor education and inquiry. I like the projects and interdisciplinary approach in both the humanities and math/science- great balance. You appear to be developing well-rounded student. I loved the music- (guitar) and the snowshoeing."
- I like the Empowered Use policy (Technology)
- My children love the school and chose it over going skiing with us this year!
- This school is preparing my child for the future
- Connect provides a well-rounded program through the core courses, the performing and visual arts, physical education, the electives and the leadership program. All great!
- I like the focus on inquiry at the school. It's really helped my son answer open ended questions.
- I like how you don't have too many rules.
- Experiential learning is very effective and working for my daughter.

2. *Staff*

- The teachers are energetic and highly motivated to help the students
- The teachers lead by example and model what they expect
- The Administration provides great leadership to the school.
- The teachers and administration did a great job supporting my child again this year.
- My children really progressed well from grades 4-9. Thank you.
- Teachers are engaged in their program and CARE.
- The way my child is able to explain his learning demonstrates to me how effective the teachers are and the school is.
- Inquiry is a very effective approach to teaching. I was concerned when my child was in grade 4. However, after 3 years, I can see the positive impact this approach has on his learning.
- I know my son will be treated fairly and with respect at Connect.
- Teachers are very quick to respond to emails and communication.
- The teachers have great relationships with the kids. I can see this every time I walk into the school.
- I appreciate how teachers bring the curriculum to life. They make learning meaningful.
- The emphasis on developing students as ethical, respectful and responsible citizens is highly valued.
- I like your cell phone policy.
- I like the looping. It's helped my son.
- I love the passion in your teacher's voices. That says it all!

- There is a culture of collaboration among the staff that fosters a respectful environment. My son sees this and is learning from this.

3. Technology

- I am very happy with the focus on the integration of technology in teaching.
- My daughter understands why they are using Ipads in their classroom. They've had discussions about digital citizenship and I think this helps prevent bullying in the school.
- I like how teachers purposefully use technology with their assignments.
- I like how teachers provide choice to my daughter – in her assignments, how she presents the assignment and the choice to work alone or with a partner.
- The use of technology helps my son and his classmates have access to more resources and to develop more depth in his understanding of what they are learning.

4. Programs

- I love your mentoring program. My daughter was mentored in grade 4 and is enjoying the leadership opportunity in grade 8.
- The class trips add so much to my son's learning. It has engaged him and helped make learning more meaningful.
- My daughter has found Connect to be very challenging. She is pushed, but also supported.
- We like your choice of electives.

5. Parent support

- After volunteering for a number of trips this year, I am amazed at the culture of support from parents for the school.
- Parents are provided with a variety of opportunities to be engaged in their child's education. This focus is highly valued.
- The parents I volunteered with had so much to offer. Their enthusiasm for the school and support to for the teachers made such a big difference.

Areas for further consideration:

- With the change in fall camps happening in September, I hope the school will re-visit their school calendar for the following year so that the first day of school is not until September. The current calendar does not align with CBE, is problematic for family holidays. I'd give up the fall break. Daycare costs are adding to the challenge as well.
- I appreciate the focus on the integration of technology, but with two children at Connect, there are too many different platforms and logins for parents. Can they be streamlined?
- Could Connect offer more team sports after school?
- I'd like to see the school expand to grade 12.
- Would Connect ever consider offering a second language program?
- We need to balance the genders in the school.

- I would like to see a little more direct instruction and structured practice in math in the early grades.
- Could you offer a grade 8 and/or 9 elective on personal finance?
- Could you consider updating your website?
- Would the school consider a full-time counselor?

Staff Interview Responses- Key Themes:

1.

Goal 1: Promote exemplary learning, teaching and leading through a disposition of inquiry.

What we are doing well:

- Our teachers are dedicated to their profession and to our students.
- Our school is doing the right thing. We are inclusive, responsive to student's diverse learning needs and we adapt our teaching style in support of our students.
- Our teachers are passionate and deeply committed to helping our students.
- Teacher professional development and the opportunities provided to staff to share their learning is very important.
- Staff appreciate when their voice is heard and when change is enacted as a result.
- Our staff appreciate the presence Chris H and Shashi S have in our classrooms.
- Our students understand the importance of teaching with a disposition of inquiry and the positive impact it has on their learning.
- Our school and teachers are very flexible and supportive of our students.

Areas for further consideration:

- Our school needs to re-examine what inquiry means and commit to a common language and approach. Perhaps we could re-visit our partnership with the Galileo institute?
- Our PD needs to gain a laser focus on inquiry practices and inclusive schooling next year. We have new staff and everyone could benefit from this focus.
- Continued classroom support from our administrators is welcomed. Is it possible to provide more time for Portfolio Leaders to assume their leadership responsibilities?

2.

Goal 2: Enhance learning and teaching through the appropriate and effective use of technology and maintain an intentional, authentic and innovative perspective in the use of technology.

What we are doing well:

- Connect staff purposefully uses technology to improve student learning.
- We are excited about the Creative Technologies course offerings forthcoming next year. We are pleased that more opportunities to learn coding skills will be available to our students next year.
- Teachers welcome the direction being provided on the use of technology and the streamlining of educational (technology) platforms. They are happy we will be using one student information system beginning next year (Powerschool).
- Our empowered use of technology agreement is effective.
- Our students understand how to use technology to improve learning.

- Our technology support team is very helpful.
- We deliberately and meaningfully use technology. We purposefully do not use technology for everything all the time. Some of us have technology-free periods or days.
- We have normalized the use of technology in the classroom so that all students have access to tools and resources.
- We involve students in understanding why the technology will help with their learning.
- Our partnership with the Tsuut'ina school is innovative. I am happy we are able to share our experiences and expertise in technology with their students and in return, learn from them.
- Many of our summative student project display the deep understanding our students have developed using technology.
- We are pleased with the Public School Works digital platform that guides Occupational Health and Safety practices in our school.

Areas for further consideration:

- How can we continue to improve communication with parents and reduce the number of logins (to different websites)?
- We need to continue developing a long-term plan for technology in our school and ensure it is communicated to all of our stakeholders.

3.

Goal 3: Engage students in meaningful real-life learning activities in a variety of rich learning environments.

What we are doing well:

- Real-life, experiential learning is alive at Connect and effective. Simulators are being used and the kids are learning from this. We create with technology, not just consume it.
- Staff are encouraged and given the resources to provide experiential learning opportunities for students. Our school administration has been very supportive with teachers to ensure they are able to provide these opportunities.
- We are happy some of our new camps are closer to Calgary.
- Our outdoor education learning opportunities are key elements of what makes Connect a great school. We are excited a newly established Portfolio Leadership position will focus on supporting this next year.
- Our teachers are very intentional in what they do, where they go to learn and why we learn.
- Our teachers are very creative in partnering with field experts that support student work and learning. (MLA presentations in school, Student Vote, guest speakers) Students have the opportunity to learn from the source.
- We have incredibly supportive parents that work with us to create the best learning environments possible.
- We build empathy within our students through the wide variety of learning experiences provided.
- Our students provide positive feedback on how engaged they are in their learning.

Areas for further consideration:

- We need to maintain open dialogue with staff on expectations for trips. Weekend trips for staff are difficult.
- Our office staff work too hard and long. How can we share the workload?

4.

Goal 4: Provide environmental, outdoor, and global education learning opportunities for students to experience and appreciate the world outside of the classroom and to develop social, leadership and stewardship skills.

What we are doing well:

- We offer great leadership learning opportunities for our students. (grade 8 leadership opportunities at Fort Steele, mentoring program, ME to WE, Family Groups, Agents of Change)
 - We have deep planning (pre and post) for all of our trips and learning experiences outside the school
 - Staff are excited about Camp Chief Hector as a new opportunity for our students.
 - The effective implementation of inquiry-based learning allows teachers to ensure context in student learning.
 - By the time our students reach grade 10, they understand they need to seek different perspectives and they understand that they can make a big difference. Our kids are the ones that will sit next to a kid that feels ostracized or silenced. They will try to help others.
- We amount of programing occurring outside our school is much more appropriate this year.

Areas for further consideration:

- We need to ensure we offer leadership opportunities for students that need these opportunities the most.

5.

Goal 5: Foster a culture of collaboration and caring relationships of mutual respect with students, staff members and parents sharing a passion for learning together and from others, in the classroom, within the school and beyond.

What we are doing well:

- Staff are getting along well and functioning as a team. Very positive culture. Teachers appreciate the voice they have in planning for experiential place-based learning opportunities.
- Grade-level teachers collaborate really well.
- Our teacher to student relationships are as strong as they have ever been.
- 'Parents as Partners' is thriving at Connect. We have open lines of communication with our parents. We are very appreciative of the parent support at Connect.

- Our Educational Assistants are very supportive, helpful and committed.
- The focus on teacher wellness has been effective.

Areas for further consideration:

- We've had a lot of staffing changes this year which has strained collaborative practices in the school. I hope we have an opportunity to revisit our mission, vision and purpose at the beginning of next year as a staff.
- How can we improve staff relationships beyond the school? Social events? How can we improve collaboration beyond grade-level collaboration? We need to focus on team building. - -
- We welcome more administrative presence in our classrooms for support.

6.

Goal 6: Nurture thriving classrooms and other learning environments where teachers are informed by research and where students and teachers explore and develop deep understanding as active researchers.

What we are doing well:

- Our teaching practices are informed by active research.
- We are continuing to innovate in our practices and need to share more of our successes with the public.
- We have a highly educated staff that are research focused.
- Our school-wide focus on inclusive practices is positive, but challenging.
- Our partnerships with post-secondary institutions remain critical to support our focus on innovation in school.
- The Connect difference- The parents support teachers. Parents believe in the program. They believe in the school administration and its leadership. Administration believes in their teachers and it's evident. The administration pushes staff because they believe in them and know they can do it.

Areas for further consideration:

- How can we improve how we share our success stories? PD time to update our blog and share our learning?
- We need to re-focus on our pillars and school charter next year.