

Visions 2010 article for DPAC – theme “Full Speed Ahead”

There's no doubt that the past year has been a tough one for parents with kids in school. Talk of closures, consolidations and reconfiguration has dominated the discussions at Parent Advisory Council tables, accompanied by high stress levels and strong emotions. Some parents count themselves lucky to have avoided changes (at least for now); others regard the future with trepidation as they consider what's best for their children and begin the process of adaptation. “Parents will always put the needs of their children first,” says Leigh-Anne Larsen, spokesperson for the SD73 District Parent Advisory Council. “Now that all the decisions have been made, parents want to make the transition as easy as possible for their kids.” Larsen notes that DPAC is in the process of organizing training for parents on how best to manage the transitions. “We'll support parents and PACs in any way we can.”

What can parents do to prepare their children for the changes they face this fall? According to the British Columbia Federation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC), there are many steps that educators and parents can take to make mergers go smoothly. “It's really important for parents and teachers to start planning right away, before the end of the school year,” says Gisela Ruckert, another DPAC exec who is currently researching school mergers around the province. “Parents and teachers from both the closing school and the receiving school should meet and discuss joint goals for the transition, identifying potential problems and dealing with them before they happen.”

For the children who will be switching schools, becoming familiar with both the physical space as well as the student body at the receiving school is step one. “They should make sure to get the kids together before the end of the school year, go on a few joint field trips, maybe even do school projects with partners from the other school. Definitely plan a year-end potluck together,” suggests Ruckert. Upon meeting their future classmates, kids will realize that they already have friends at their new school, people they've met through hockey, dance, or other community activities. “Even knowing there will be one or two familiar faces reduces the anxiety level for the students.”

A school merger is also an opportunity for the receiving school to redefine itself. This might be the year for the students to vote on a new school mascot, or come up with a new name for the now-combined sports team. Parent Advisory Councils might choose to have co-presidents for a year, one from each of the schools. “It's critical that the history of both schools be kept in mind as they blend into a new entity,” says Ruckert. This could mean bringing beloved playground equipment to the receiving school, making room for another trophy case to display the hardware earned by the closing school, serving favourite meals from both schools as part of the school lunch program – each blended community has to find its own unique ways to honour the traditions of both school communities.

Change is never easy, but with patience and perseverance, parents can work with educators to create a new community that is not only bigger but also better for the students who will soon be calling the blended school “home”. For more information on school mergers, contact the District Parent Advisory Council at sd73dpac@gmail.com.