

# Let's Talk About Our Schools

By Ruth Baumann

*“Hi, my name is Marilyn Jones, and I’m calling on behalf of the Ontario Teachers’ Federation. I’m calling to invite you to a discussion on the future of education that we’re sponsoring on October 17 in the Oakwood community. We’d like to hear your views and those of other members of the community on what we can do to improve our schools, and to make them the best that they can be. We are inviting about 100 community representatives to come and talk in small groups about positive steps that we can take for our schools and our kids. Would you be able to attend on October 17?”*

**A**cross Ontario, more than 23 forums have been held since January, 1999, with approximately 2500 participants. These evening events range in size from 60 to 160 participants, and each follows a common format: participants from all sectors of the community work in groups of eight to nine, with a teacher facilitator, discussing ways to improve the education system and looking for common ground. The evening concludes with all participants sharing the common ground and proposed next steps from their discussions.

These forums are a first in many respects. For many community participants, it is the first time that their views have been sought. For many teachers, it is the first opportunity to discuss education issues with their community outside a parent-teacher interview. For parents and students, it is an opportunity to look from their own individual experience and to consider how the school and the system might be improved.

The forum project grew out of some public opinion

*For many community participants, it is the first time that their views have been sought. For many teachers, it is the first opportunity to discuss education issues with their community outside a parent-teacher interview.*

research and strategic planning undertaken by the Ontario Teachers’ Federation in 1998. A province-wide poll revealed the following:

- Ontarians place a high value on public education;
- Ontarians are not satisfied with “what was” in their schools or the status quo;
- There is little agreement on specific reforms, but much agreement on a general need for change;
- Public opinion is not being engaged by highly polarized debate or by polarized advertising.

This accounts in some measure for the observation that, while education issues were frequently high on the “top of mind” list of the public in opinion polls, concern for education was not sufficiently concentrated to make political change. What became clear in focus groups was that - given the opportunity to discuss education issues in a non-confrontational way - participants would become more keenly aware of the importance of public education and motivated to work to improve it.

Looked at in a larger, more global context, public confidence in many of our larger social institutions - schools, health care, social assistance - has eroded over the last decade without being replaced by new, alternative visions for those institutions that had previously enjoyed widespread public support. Instead, political critics offer simplistic fixes to emotional, hot-button issues that, in their turn, don’t work particularly well either.

The OTF community forums are an attempt to answer the questions:

- “How do we, as communities and as a society, build a new vision for what we want our schools to be and do?” and
- “How can the engagement and commitment of the community to an excellent school system be rekindled and maintained?”

The forum process has been developed for the Federation as a “deliberative dialogue” - a facilitated discussion about what should be changed, how it can be changed, and the pros and cons of various strategies. Each forum starts with the commitment of the local teacher leaders to begin that process with their communities. The Federation provides an experienced community organizer to help the local teachers identify the constituent parts of the community that need to be invited, and to train them in telephone contact and follow-up for the invitation process. Participants are recruited from local businesses, labour councils, clergy, youth services, police, seniors, ratepayers, parent organizations, students,

## EN BREF

Les forums communautaires organisés par la Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et enseignants permettent aux membres de la collectivité de participer à des discussions dirigées sur leurs écoles. Pour plusieurs, il s'agit souvent de la première occasion qu'ils et elles ont de parler de questions d'éducation en dehors du cadre des rencontres parents-maître.

*Given the opportunity to discuss education issues in a non-confrontational way, participants became more keenly aware of the importance of public education and motivated to work to improve it.*

teachers and school administrators. Teacher facilitators are trained in the specific process and questions to be used in the forum. The dialogue process concludes with participants identifying areas of agreement or common ground, as well as next steps that might be pursued. Forums have been most successful when at least 50% of the participants are not teachers, students, trustees or board employees.

### **What the participants say about the process**

All forum participants are asked "How worthwhile was this evening's discussion?" on a scale of 1-5. So far, participants have awarded an average of 4.3 or 4.4 out of a possible 5. Consistently, many of the participants who rate the evening as less than 5 do so because they fear that there will be no follow-up, not because the evening itself was not valuable. At OTF, we feel we have tapped into a hunger in our communities for this kind of constructive engagement and a real desire to see it continue. In Hamilton, out of 111 responses (there were 132 participants), 103 indicated that they wanted the discussions to continue, and 102 indicated an interest in being contacted further. In Orillia, of 82 responses, 81 indicated that they wished to see the discussions continue.

So far, the "continuation" of the discussions has taken the form of extending the process to other communities within the region, or more spontaneous activities involving forum participants getting together to solve specific issues. In Ingersoll, for example, one forum participant gathered other forum participants together to address some community concerns about youth at risk. This meeting produced a successful summer program for these young people. In January 2001, the teachers in Owen Sound are planning to invite all of the participants from their April, 1999 forum to an all-day event on a Saturday, focussed on actions that can be taken locally to improve education. As the local forums continue to spread across Ontario, OTF is beginning to plan for a provincial forum, involving selected participants from the larger community across Ontario, to be held in late 2001 or early 2002. 📍

**Ruth Baumann** has been a member of the professional staff of the Ontario Teachers' Federation since 1990. She works in the areas of government relations, policy development and strategic planning.

Continued from page 29

## Student Achievement

plans of each group complemented or supplemented each other. They were aligned and focused on activities designed to enhance student achievement.

The staff development plan is school-focused, but with strong district support. It is based on a recognition of the importance and effectiveness of job-embedded learning and of the need for follow-up support over a sustained period (e.g. workshops constitute approximately 10% of the plan; group sharing makes up 25%, and individual study/ reflection 65%). Its implementation is seen as the responsibility of all administrators and teachers in the system. It is intended to promote a climate of collaboration, sharing, and mentoring among all staff members in the school division - and the creation of a system in which people are continually learning together.

A vital component of the plan is "assessment literacy," which Fullan describes as "the ability - and the desire - to look at achievement data, to share results, to get more knowledge and to improve your instruction."<sup>3</sup> Principals involve all staff in the analysis of achievement test and diploma exam results. A computer program - Achievement Test Results Analysis and Critique (ATRAC) - has been purchased for each school. The program facilitates an item-by-item analysis of each test result. Through this analysis, each school staff is able to determine not only program strengths, but also which areas of the program require modification or greater emphasis. School staffs use the results of this analysis to formulate action plans for improvement, which are incorporated into their Three-Year Improvement Plans.

An evaluation instrument, based on National Staff Development Council standards, has been developed by the committee to monitor the plan on an annual basis. When the results were tabulated after one year of implementation, it was found that school staffs see the Plan as meeting almost all NSDC standards and feel that it has helped individuals, school staffs, and the district to meet their priorities. Most important, student achievement - the ultimate measure - has continued to improve since the Plan's implementation. 📍

1 Michael Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (New York: Teachers' College Press, 1991), 197.

2 D. Sparks and S. Hirsh, *A New Vision for Staff Development* (Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD, 1997).

3 Michael Fullan, *What's Worth Fighting For Out There? Dealing with Change*, conference handout, Edmonton, October, 1998.

**Stephen Smith** is Deputy Superintendent in Battle River Regional School Division, responsible for curriculum coordination and staff development. The school division is located southeast of Edmonton, and includes over thirty schools with 7500 students. Its central office is in Camrose, Alberta. e-mail: ssmith@brrd.ab.ca