

FEBRUARY 2024 ISSUE

Catholic Teacher

MAGAZINE of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association

C E L E B R A T I N G

BLACK

**HISTORY
MONTH**

**HOW TO APPROACH
DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS
ABOUT RACE AND
GENDER IDENTITY**

**UNDERSTANDING
THE LIMITS TO
TEACHERS' FREEDOM
OF SPEECH**

**FIGHTING DEMOCRATIC
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March 4 to June 17

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



This year marks OECTA's 80th anniversary. This milestone reflects the significant progress in our efforts and perseverance to empower members, while advancing social justice within the Association, across our many classrooms, and in our communities. With the 80th AGM on the horizon, I take this opportunity to recognize the many members who have dedicated their time to share ideas, debate issues, and reaffirm our shared values as Catholic teachers since that first general meeting in 1944. This is central to the democracy of our organization and a key component to defining the governance, values, and future of OECTA.

A lot has changed in recent years, both in OECTA and the world around us. While our focus on collective bargaining continues, necessarily, the COVID-19 pandemic has also shaped and shifted our world and profession as we know it. The pre-COVID year of 2019 is already five years behind us. While we still grapple with many of the challenges spurred on by the pandemic, and the failures in government support across our many school boards, we cannot lose sight of the fact that students continued to learn because of the work of teachers and education workers. Too often, as teachers, we do not give ourselves the credit that we deserve. Amidst the challenges and hardships, you are champions, and I thank you for all that you do for your students and in defence of publicly funded Catholic education.

This marks a critical time, where we must identify and recognize that the world has changed; that it is not what it used to be. As an Association, we have reached a turning point where it is necessary to review and reflect on our strengths, challenges, and opportunities. We need to consider the future that we want to build and what we need to do to shape that future. This means listening to our members, reflecting on our many ideas and experiences, and learning from each other.

We strengthen our organization when we create more opportunities for members to engage and contribute, and when we include the voices and experiences of all members. This also requires us to do the work to recognize and learn from the cultural habits of our Association that have created barriers to the inclusion of all members. The benefit of our efforts to evolve does not minimize the challenge and discomfort, but it does equip us with the skills to have the uncomfortable conversations and confront the existing structures within our Association.

This edition of *Catholic Teacher* shares personal stories that connect to the impact of our experiences and lend insight to our many struggles. May these stories continue to make a difference in the lives of our fellow members and help shape the future of our collective efforts.

As Catholic teachers, we are honoured to celebrate Black History Month in our classrooms, schools, and beyond. Black History Month is a time to honour Black communities, to actively listen, to amplify and share in the richness of Black history, and to reflect upon Canada's history of anti-Black racism. Too often the rich histories, many achievements, and cultural contributions of Black people, including our members, have gone unrecognized. May this be part of the change we work toward in our classrooms, communities, and across this Association.

In two short years, it will be 2026, and perhaps the most important election in Ontario history will take place. This election will present a crossroad for the future of our province, where Ontarians will choose to vote on the side of the common good or for the privatization of public services, including health care and education.

Continued >>

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We need to elect a government that is of the people, by the people, and for the people. We need to protect our publicly funded systems and the future of our province. We cannot endure another round of provincial bargaining like this one. We need to protect our profession and elect a government that believes in the value of investing in public services and the people they serve.

As an Association, we are reviewing our opportunities to engage more members – all members – to contribute and participate to a greater extent. There is value in every voice. It remains our common goal and interest to build on our collective efforts, to look forward, and to find hope in each other. Together, we reflect the diversity of our membership, the values of public education, and the important historical role that Catholic education continues to play.

In solidarity,



René Jansen in de Wal
President

ONTARIO ENGLISH
Catholic
Teachers
ASSOCIATION

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

If you would like to connect with us to share your thoughts, ideas, or concerns, please reach out to us at publicaffairs@catholicteachers.ca. *There is no voice more important than a member's voice.*



What's New?

WINTER SESSIONS

Click **HERE** to see the new slate of WebExperience sessions.

WEB EXPERIENCE

The graphic features a woman with a large afro hairstyle wearing a red sweater and gloves, smiling. The background is red with white snowflake icons. The text 'What's New?' is in a white, bubbly font. 'WINTER SESSIONS' is in white, bold, sans-serif font. 'Click HERE to see the new slate of WebExperience sessions.' is in white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, 'WEB EXPERIENCE' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif letters, with each letter in a different colored box (W: green, E: blue, B: yellow, E: orange, X: red, P: purple, E: teal, R: light blue, I: light green, E: yellow, N: light blue, C: teal, E: light green).

CALENDAR

FEBRUARY

Black History Month

- 19 Family Day
- 20 World Day of Social Justice
- 21 Deadline for Schools to Submit Young Authors Awards Entries to Local OECTA Units
- 22 National Human Trafficking Awareness Day
- 28 Pink Shirt Day

MARCH

Women's History Month

- 6 Provincial-level Deadline for Young Authors Awards Entries
- 8 International Women's Day
- 9-11 Annual General Meeting
- 21 International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
- 23 Earth Hour (8:30 - 9:30 p.m.)
- 29 Good Friday
- 31 OTIP Teaching Awards Nominations Close
- 31 Easter Sunday

APRIL

- 1 Easter Monday
- 1 Scholarships & Fellowships Application Deadline
- 10 Day of Pink
- 22 Earth Day
- 24 Spring Mini-Courses Registration Closes

UP FRONT

AGM 2024

Annual General Meeting (AGM) 2024 will be held in person at the Westin Harbour Castle Hotel in Toronto on **March 9 to 11**.

The *Resolutions and Nominations* booklet is available in the Members' Area at catholicteachers.ca. This booklet includes all proposed policy, procedural, and by-law changes to be debated at this year's AGM. Contact your local unit office to find out how you can provide input regarding the AGM resolutions.

Members who wish to observe the AGM online will be able to access portions of the meeting via livestream in the Members' Area at catholicteachers.ca.

Click [HERE](#) to access AGM materials in the Members' Area.

CELEBRATE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY THROUGH FILM

Attention teachers teaching Grades 7 to 12! Join Docs for Schools for their annual International Women's Day screening of "Copa71"!

This is the extraordinary story of the 1971 Women's Soccer World Cup, a tournament witnessed by record crowds that has been written out of sporting history – until now. Produced by Venus and Serena Williams and told by the pioneering women who participated in it, this amazing documentary is built from archival footage unseen for 50 years.

The documentary, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2023, will screen on **March 6 at 10 a.m.** at the Hot Docs Ted Rogers Cinema in Toronto, and will be followed by a live Q&A with special guests.

Booking for this event opens **February 6**.

Click [HERE](#) to book a screening for your class.

**OTIP/OTF TEACHING AWARDS:
ACKNOWLEDGE A GREAT TEACHER**

The OTIP/OTF Teaching Awards recognize teachers who inspire students, colleagues, and parents in Ontario's publicly funded education system.

Anyone can nominate a teacher in one of three categories: elementary, secondary, or a beginning teacher in their first five years of teaching. Winners receive \$1,000 and a Certificate of Recognition for both themselves and their schools.

Nominations are now open and will be received until **March 31**.

Click **HERE** to learn more and apply.

**Connect with a school
in Africa**

chalice.ca
Through School
Connections, your school
can make real change for
students in need.

**CBC'S FIRST PAGE STUDENT
WRITING CHALLENGE**

CBC's First Page student writing challenge is a national writing competition for students in Grades 7 to 12, which invites learners from across Canada to write the first page of a novel set 150 years in the future, imagining how present-day issues and trends have played out.

Catholic teachers are encouraged to share this exciting learning opportunity with their students.

The First Page writing challenge will be accepting submissions via its online portal until **February 29**.

Click **HERE** to visit the CBC website to learn more.

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**Conference
Registration Open!**

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ontarioarteducationassociation.org
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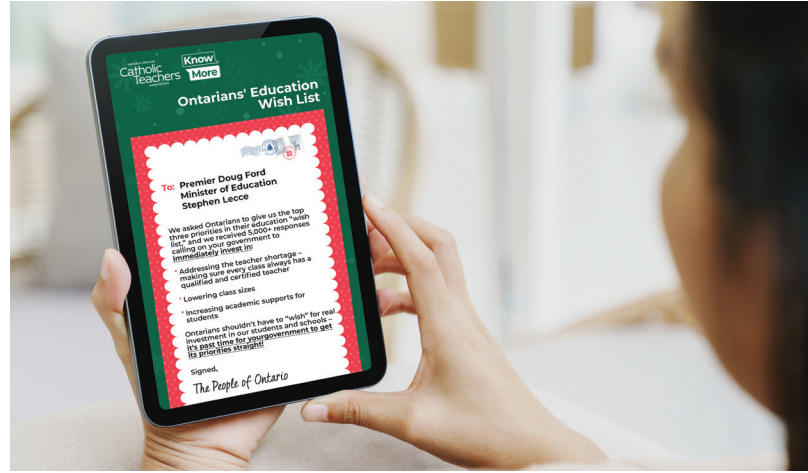
Events

/ Encouraging Ontarians to “Know More” about what Doug Ford is prioritizing over education

From funding retrofits of Staples and Walmart stores in a ServiceOntario privatization scheme to costly plans to relocate the Ontario Science Centre to a smaller location to investing half a billion dollars in a luxury spa parking lot, Premier Doug Ford’s misguided priorities continue to generate seemingly endless headlines and head-scratching among those of us who value investing in critical public services.

While not always explicitly tied to education, these are just some of the questionable initiatives – often coupled with major funding dollars – that the Ford Conservative government is *actively choosing* to prioritize over investing in education.

To highlight Premier Ford’s wrongheaded priorities, the Association has been using our ongoing **Know More** campaign to create rapid response ads. These are digital advertisements that connect eye-catching headlines and top-of-mind issues, such as the Greenbelt



and ServiceOntario scandals, to publicly funded education, underlining for Ontarians how the Ford Conservative government’s failed priorities are *in fact* robbing students and schools of desperately needed investment and attention.

Beyond advertising, the Association is also using this approach to capture Ontarians’ attention in other ways, including seasonal events. For instance, in the lead up to Christmas, we asked our **Know More** supporters what was on their education wish list. The top items included addressing the teacher shortage, lowering class sizes, and increasing supports for students. To amplify and share these concerns, we used these top issues to create an online holiday card for Premier Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce, calling on the government to get its priorities straight and invest in students and schools.

As our **Know More** campaign continues to grow and evolve, watch for new and exciting ways to get involved as we champion the message that Ontario’s students and teachers deserve better.

Click [HERE](#) to visit **KnowMore.ca** and join the campaign!

/ Connecting with Members Online Forum

In December, OECTA's Diversity Advisory Board hosted their latest Connecting with Members online forum. The theme of the forum was "Our Joy Matters." Participants heard from Dr. Andrew B. Campbell as he unpacked the concept of "joy as resistance, resilience, and reclamation," sharing with attendees to:

- **Cultivate your joy** by taking time to appreciate the simple things in your day-to-day life that uplift you and nourish you when your joy runs low. Use this as a form of resistance to notions of sadness, pain, and systemic oppression.
- **Claim your joy as resistance** to the preconceived notions rooted in sadness, pain, and systemic oppression that hold you back in your community as Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+, Black, racialized, or people living with disabilities. **Resilience** allows you to bounce back from adversities with grit and tenacity.
- **Reclaim your narrative** when you are not handled with care in your workplace and your personal life. Remind the people handling you that you need affirmation and adulation for you to flourish. Joy is a powerful force that asserts agency and counters negative narratives about you.

It was an inspiring and affirming talk for all the Indigenous and equity-deserving Catholic teachers who participated, and an important and informative session for those members in attendance who do not identify as belonging to an Indigenous or equity-deserving group.

A recording of Dr. Campbell's address has been posted to the Members' Area at catholicteachers.ca for all Catholic teachers to watch, enjoy, and learn from.

Click [HERE](#) to watch Dr. Campbell's address.

/ Fighting for the right to strike

December 18 marked the 50th anniversary of an event that changed collective bargaining for Ontario teachers forever. On that date, in protest of twin government bills that would deny teachers the right to strike, levy fines on any teachers who walked out in protest, and impose compulsory arbitration, almost every school in the province was shut down, as 90,000 of Ontario's 105,000 teachers did not show up to school.

The day of action culminated at a rally of 18,000 teachers and supporters at Maple Leaf Gardens, in Toronto, which was followed by a march on Queen's Park, where the number of participants swelled to more than 30,000.

The mass action was the first of its kind, and teachers' solidarity won the day and captured headlines, as the government abandoned its proposed legislation.

As recently recounted in the December issue of *Catholic Teacher* by Peter Murphy and Ab Dukacz, two retired staff members at Provincial Office, the factors that would create the catalyst for the December 18 demonstration had been building for years prior (their article is well worth the read if you have not yet had an opportunity). Working conditions for teachers were dramatically different back then, and this event and teachers' powerful collective action, set the tone for political advocacy for decades to come.



Rally at Maple Leaf Gardens, December 18, 1973

Click [HERE](#) to read the article and learn more about the December 18 day of action.



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Qualified members can access a variety of scholarships and fellowships to help further their studies and career.

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Consider applying for a

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Each year, bursaries of up to \$1,000 are awarded to individual members who are pursuing undergraduate studies, post-graduate studies, or professional development activities as part of their lifelong learning.

APPLY BY MAY 1

Click **HERE** to learn more about these opportunities and how to apply.

Join a Provincial Committee



Applications will be accepted from **March 4** to **May 1**

Click **HERE** to learn more and apply online.

MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE USING AIDE LEARNING CIRCLES

By Caroline Chikoore

How can I make my workplace more inclusive and welcoming? How should I approach difficult conversations about race? What is my responsibility to undo racism in my workplace and community?

These are questions that most of us have asked ourselves as we navigate our workplaces and union. In this article, I want to share a method we used at Provincial Office to explore these questions in a safe and respectful way that promotes dialogue, vulnerability, shared learning, and commitment to individual action

Learning circles

Learning circles are practical methods of learning about social change. They are made up of small groups of individuals with a common interest to learn collectively about self-identified topics. They are flexible, peer-directed learning experiences that are built on the idea that every member has something to contribute and something to learn. In a learning circle, a subject matter expert facilitates discussion, sets the agenda, and steers the group towards intended outcomes. Facilitators can be drawn from inside or outside the group.

The method has been in use for hundreds of years, with historic links to King Arthur and his Round Table. Its modern use is associated with community organizations, trade unions, churches, schools, and social justice groups, to empower individual awareness and action.

The Association recently used learning circles to initiate anti-racism discussions with a goal to move participants from awareness to action. At the onset, participants were provided with an opportunity to sign up for three learning circles, each an hour in duration, held over a three-week period. Each learning circle consisted of a diverse group of (eight to 12) people. A facilitator then assigned curated video content and reading resources for advance review. Each video was

supported with a list of questions for individual reflection. The questions were related to how the video made them feel, whether they agreed/disagreed with topics discussed, ideas that made them do some internal thinking, how key concepts shared in the video applied to their lives, and the type of action participants can take to contribute to inclusive and equitable social environments in the workplace.

As part of the process, group norms were set for respectful, productive discussions, and each norm was reviewed with the group, with meaning assigned that reinforced the goals. Norms were adapted from Glen Singleton's *Courageous Conversations About Race* and the Association's own community norms for events, which include:

- » Everyone has wisdom.
- » Stay engaged.
- » There are no wrong answers.
- » Be mindful of your body language and tone of voice.
- » Everyone will hear others and be heard.
- » Think about impact over intent.



Lessons from race and identity learning circles

Discussions were centred on the work of three credible authors

Learning Circle

1

“Deconstructing White Privilege”

Dr. Robin DiAngelo

This video was instrumental in starting conversations about “whiteness” in a constructive way.

Participants discussed their discomfort with terms such as “white fragility” and “white privilege,” which tend to elicit defensive behaviour, which in turn, compelled them to have introspective dialogue with themselves to learn where such defensiveness derives from. There was recognition that “white skin” provides protective pillows for racial comfort, benefits, and opportunities that are not available to other racial groups.

The discussion unpacked how the cultural norm of good/bad binary made it difficult for white people to understand and interrupt racism. Following the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, many people believed that only intentional malicious acts of extreme prejudice were classified as racist and that only bad people committed those acts. These views persist without recognition that unconscious bias by “good white people” can be as harmful to racialized people as overt racism.

Participants acknowledged that “white fragility” is another form of asserting racial supremacy, particularly as it triggers defensive behaviours, such as shutting down race related conversations and victim blaming of those affected by racism. “White fragility” is associated with the discomfort of dealing with emotional stress when confronted with race, which emanates as anger, fear, confusion, or guilt.

Participants committed to further learning and seeking feedback to enhance self-awareness and inclusive behaviour.

Click [HERE](#) to watch “Deconstructing White Privilege” with Dr. Robin D’Angelo (20 minutes).

Learning Circle

2

“The Skin We’re In: Pulling Back the Curtain on Racism in Canada”

Desmond Cole

Desmond Cole’s video, “The Skin We’re In,” elicited strong emotional responses, with participants using phrases such as “sad,” “embarrassed,” and “disturbed” to describe their reactions to the overt anti-Black racism in Canada evidenced in the video. Part of the reason for these reactions, is that most participants have been socialized to believe that Canada’s multiculturalism makes it more inclusive and equitable than the United States, where overt racism is widely reported in the media.

Discussions examined anti-Black racism in Catholic schools and the backlash experienced by Black teachers and students who report these practices. In the video, Desmond Cole challenges the concept of labelling complainants as troublemakers, which is prevalent in institutionalized racist practices to suppress, instead of resolve, racial tensions. Participants connected what was presented to the video with Robin DiAngelo, who attributes this behaviour to beliefs of “white defensiveness” and “white innocence” that drive behaviours to protect “white advantages” and “white discomfort” when faced with racial tensions. Participants acknowledged the courage it takes for a Black person to speak up against systems that are structured to “blame the victim” and suppress their voices. When it comes to racism, there is no neutrality or bystanders, individuals have the responsibility to act or disrupt institutionalized racist practices.

Click [HERE](#) to watch “The Skin We’re In: Pulling Back the Curtain on Racism in Canada” by Desmond Cole (44 minutes).

”

When it comes to racism, there is no neutrality or bystanders, individuals have the responsibility to act or disrupt institutionalized racist practices.

Learning Circle

3

“Decolonization is for Everyone”

Nikki Sanchez

In “Decolonization Is for Everyone,” Nikki Sanchez provides a nuanced definition of intergenerational trauma, one that recognizes not just Indigenous Peoples, but also non-Indigenous Canadians who remain silent to the violent history faced by Indigenous Peoples. Most of the participants in this learning circle decried the historical absence of Indigenous curriculum in schools and shared their own ignorance of the history of Canada’s Indigenous Peoples. And most were upset by the unspoken history of medical experimentation on Indigenous students and the kidnapping of more than 150,000 children, which is connected to the creation of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), a colonial tool that exerted its force to drive children into residential schools.

Nikki Sanchez’s call to action, that “this history is not your fault but is your responsibility,” was found by participants to be affirming of the troublesome history, yet also paves the way for contributions toward Reconciliation. Action-centred discussion focussed on how the Association can support Indigenous Peoples, which is described as “the effort by Indigenous Peoples to reclaim their language, culture, and ceremonies.” Participants also discussed how OECTA can contribute to decolonization, described as “the work required by non-Indigenous people to further the advancement and empowerment of Indigenous Peoples in our workplaces and union.”

Click [HERE](#) to watch “Decolonization Is for Everyone” with Nikki Sanchez (13 minutes).

Summary

The learning circles were an effective tool for participants to speak openly about their socialized beliefs, listen to each other, reflect on different racial experiences, and identify opportunities for individual and institutional change. You can explore how to apply this method at your school or local unit to advance the Association’s goals for greater inclusion and equity, for your diverse members and students.

Caroline Chikoore is the Accessibility, Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity (AIDE) Lead at OECTA Provincial Office.

Addressing polarization

Pope Francis and the Synod on Synodality

By Yvonne Runstedler

For me, Christmas holidays have always been a time to gather, break bread, and enjoy one another's company. It has also been a time when I have been careful about what subjects I bring up in whose company, carefully avoiding politics and religion, as I was taught to "keep the peace."

As I reflect on the growing polarization in our world and in our Church, I now think that this advice to avoid controversial conversations did not help

us collectively keep the peace. It may have made passing the time around the Christmas tree temporarily a little easier, but it did not address a fundamental inability to listen to one another. This is true in many contexts in our society, and in the Catholic Church in particular, there are competing voices who attempt to define what it means to be Catholic, and therefore who is and is not one.

In his leadership, Pope Francis is actively trying to address this polarization: our growing inability to sit and discuss issues

about which we care deeply. While he has published many books, encyclicals, and other writings addressing this, it is perhaps his focus on synodality that best exemplifies his strong encouragement that Catholics listen to one another.

As explained by Pope Francis, synodality in the Catholic Church is:

"[N]ew as an institution but ancient in its inspiration – has provided an effective support to the Roman Pontiff... [and] those requiring special knowledge and judgement for the good of the whole Church."

Below, I summarize some of the key ways that Pope Francis' focus on a renewal of synodality can inform our pedagogy. Let me be clear, in the synodal process, we are not told exactly what to think. But, as Catholics, we are encouraged to sit, break bread, and listen to one another *with an open heart and mind*.

In 2017, the International Theological Commission, at the behest of Pope Francis, reviewed synodality in the Catholic Church. This resulted in the document, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," which outlines:

"Without conversion of the heart and mind and without disciplined training for welcoming and listening to one another the external instruments of communion would be of hardly any use; on the contrary, they could be transformed into mere heartless, faceless masks."



To render ourselves more than mere “heartless, faceless masks,” we must listen to one another. This includes sitting with, in a spirit of encounter, those who hold diverse identities and opinions.

In preparations for the official Synod on Synodality in Rome this past October, Pope Francis instituted a consultation process, attempting to engage all Catholics throughout the world, including Catholic school boards in Ontario. In these consultations, which contained online questionnaires, working groups, discussions, retreats, and more, issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion arose. These consultations led to a summary guiding document, entitled “XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: Instrumentum Laboris For the First Session” (October 2023), for reflection during the 2023 and 2024 gathering of Church leaders – lay and clerical in Rome. One of the suggestions for prayer and reflection is:

“How can we create spaces where those who feel hurt by the Church and unwelcomed by the community feel recognised, received, free to ask questions and not judged? In the light of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, what concrete steps are needed to welcome those who feel excluded from the Church because of their status or sexuality?”

American Catholic Youth Minister Tracey Lamont recognizes that this dialogue is within a larger context. In “From Change to Transformation: Living Synodality in Ministry with Young Adults,” she suggests that:

“What is needed for the Church today, in a country afflicted by the sins of racial injustice perpetuated by white supremacy

and laboring to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, is real transformation – not change. Ministry leaders need to develop a completely new way of being church, one... that emerges through the process of synodality. My own experiences with the National Dialogue, research on postmodern curriculum development, and the Synod on Synodality gives me hope that pastoral ministers can enact the transformation needed to accompany young people in life.”

When the first meeting of the Synod closed in October (the second is scheduled for October 2024), those who attended shared:

“We carry in our hearts the desire, sustained by hope, that the climate of mutual listening and sincere dialogue that we experienced during the days of common work in Rome will radiate in our communities and throughout the world, at the service of the growth of the good seed of the Kingdom of God.”

In the podcast “Jesuitical,” synod participant Fr. James Martin described the methods taken at the Synod on Synodality in Rome when discussing polarizing issues.

Fr. Martin shared that the Pope was present but not presiding, demonstrating synodality by ceding structural authority, and a variety of people facilitated. These lay and clerical facilitators reinforced with all participants, including the hierarchical elite, that each person would be heard, stopping anyone from interrupting those presenting. Even more, after their thoughts and

ideas were presented, two minutes of prayerful silence was enforced before response.

I wonder what would happen if we used this model to profoundly consider the various difficulties plaguing our societies right now.

To illustrate, I now return to that time around the Christmas tree. Imagine a world in which two minutes was required before response after someone makes a controversial comment. Imagine, also, a world where the person making the comment has time, and is expected to, fully expand their comments with ideas, experience, and evidence that they have deeply contemplated. It almost sounds too ideal to be possible.

It also sounds like such a methodology might be exactly what we need to address the polarization in our world.

Yvonne Runstedler is a Staff Officer in the Administration department at OEETA Provincial Office, with an AIDE-focused assignment.



Pope Francis celebrates a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, opening the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon region.

Photo by @Riccardo De Luca, Shutterstock.com.

We have more work to do

By Tia Duke

Almost four years ago, I wrote the words “we have work to do,” as a call to action to confront anti-Black racism in Ontario’s publicly funded Catholic schools. Since that time, many Catholic school boards and Catholic partners have been compelled to act. The social pressure, and organizational need, resulted in varied responses from Catholic school boards. So, here we are, in 2024, and in many places and spaces consultants have been hired, audits have been conducted, strategic plans have been developed, data has been collected, communities have been consulted, training has been offered, and new positions and programs have been created.

I have mentioned before that working at OECTA Provincial Office allows me the privilege of sitting at many tables, and I get to meet a lot of people. I do not take this ability to connect with others for granted. I have had the pleasure of meeting the only Black director at a Catholic school board in Ontario, a few superintendents, newly positioned administrators, and numerous teachers who are in leadership roles in their school communities.

I have shared the knowing gaze of pride mixed with awareness of the challenges ahead, and I have felt excitement in the firm handshake or the tight affirming hug of that representation – yes, representation does matter. I have watched Black Catholic teachers engage in Association activities at the local and provincial level, and encourage others to do so as well, championing OECTA’s call to get involved, signalled through the accessibility, inclusion, diversity, and equity (AIDE) work that our union is striving to make a part of *everything* we do.

I am cautiously optimistic, while remaining keenly aware that these advancements are more than enough for some, too much or too fast for others, and just the beginning or not enough for Black teachers and educators who continue to experience the workplace hazard of anti-Black racism in their school communities. So, ultimately, we have more work to do. Yes, we absolutely do.

Currently, I reflect on how my focus has shifted from centring the big system *we*, to focusing on the small *we* of individual action and accountability. As I have observed, one attitudinal barrier to change is framing systems as a powerful force of anti-Blackness, which we as individuals have little ability to change. Viewing organizations as entities absent of people who hold decision making power, or the ability to take individual or collective action, is a major barrier to change. “We can only do so much,” “change takes time,” or “it is the system” are all remarks that I have heard as explanations as to why it is so difficult to confront and dismantle anti-Black racism in our Catholic schools, Association, and beyond. But we have agency and power.

Those who hold institutional power, the power to decide whether to review and change policies and practices, can and must do so. We can do more than just acknowledge disparities; we can try to learn new skills to address them. We can listen, and not just performative listening and learning – the kind that leads only to inaction. We can really listen to understand, and take action based on our power and influence. In fact, we can stop saying we are listening and learning, if we really are not.

As individuals, we have the power to reflect on why the response of shock, awe, or surprise that anti-Black racism exists in 2024 is dismissive. We can choose not to deny the existence of anti-Black racism, or to imply that a human being wanting to be treated with dignity is too much. We can self-regulate and think about the impact of our words. We can reflect on the impact of vocalizing, exhausted simply by hearing about anti-Black racism, or reflect on if we are “over” equity or anti-racism training. We can put our ego aside when Black teachers and educators continue to disrupt, advocate for more, for better, and not get stuck in the self-centredness of the idea that “we are doing good work.” Finally, we can, and should, always reflect on who is missing, who is left out, who is pushed out, or who is still being left behind in the work that we are doing.

I have been blessed to cross paths with many Black people and allies dedicated to creating change in publicly funded Catholic education. I have had the privilege of being cared for in the OECTA space by a God-fearing Black woman, who recently retired after 35 years of working as Support Staff at OECTA Provincial Office – in the community, we would describe her as an Aunty. I would describe her as a great storyteller and knowledge keeper. This Aunty in the space told me she would pray for me and left me with advice that I recall daily and hold close to my heart. The unspoken in our exchange of the knowing gaze at her retirement party confirmed that yes, we absolutely have more work to do.



Advocacy in action: Catholic teachers making space

A spotlight on Black student unions and associations in Catholic schools

The seemingly simple act of taking up space, combined with the difficult choice to share one's truths, and then take action to make a difference, are what Black student unions (BSUs) and Black student associations or alliances (BSAs) do in Ontario's publicly funded Catholic education system. Black student unions and associations advocate and activate to improve Black learners' quality of life in school. These affinity spaces are grounded in social justice as learners work in their respective communities to improve the school culture and the world around them, not only for themselves but for future students.

Over the past few years, publicly funded Catholic school boards in Ontario have prioritized creating formalized affinity spaces for Black learners, in the form of BSUs or BSAs. Depending on the school community, Catholic teachers work collaboratively with Black graduation coaches, child and youth workers, social workers, and administrators to create culturally relevant and responsive leadership opportunities for Black learners across the province.

The Black Catholic teachers and non-Black teachers (who I will refer to as allies) who are staff advisors to these groups, all bring many gifts and talents to their learners. In their roles, they leverage their knowledge of school policy, and positional power as teachers, to help the learners accomplish their collective goals as unions and associations.

It is not surprising that Black and ally Catholic teachers would see value in the role of staff advisors to Black students, working together to discuss experiences



Tia Duke with students from BSUs at Bishop P.F. Reding C.S.S. and St. Kateri Tekakwitha C.S.S.

and issues that impact them, organizing and advocating for themselves and others, and championing social justice. As teachers and union members, we understand that core leadership competencies can be developed when working in a supportive space that represents the interests of its members, as well as what is beneficial for the common good of society, all while receiving opportunities to learn and grow.

I have met Catholic teachers who express their desire to be a strong ally, centre student voices, and take up only as much space as needed to guide learners to run the group. I have watched ally teacher advisors wait outside sessions I facilitated, and directly acknowledge their positionality and privilege as white

people in facilitating conversations about their students' lived experiences. I have witnessed Black Catholic teachers support their learners as they navigate layered experiences of anti-Black racism as individuals, or directed toward their affinity group, even while they were experiencing anti-Black racism themselves. I observe how Black and ally Catholic teachers work collaboratively with board equity consultants, Black graduation coaches, child and youth workers, and social workers, to formalize or provide more wraparound supports to these affinity spaces.

A full circle moment for me, was being a virtual guest speaker for the BSU at my former high school in spring 2022. It was an experience my teenage self could have never imagined. It was also my privilege

to connect with two BSUs as a guest speaker last fall, and, in the early winter, I attended a community town hall where BSA members bravely spoke up about the anti-Black racism they experienced at school.

I have had the opportunity to witness children speak about the goings on of their day, while I quietly prepared to speak to their respective groups. I observed

quiet listeners, fast talkers, comedians, advocates, academics, artists, tech experts, athletes, the certain, and the uncertain all take up space and just be human as Black children – and be children in school. I have witnessed past presidents advising and supporting current presidents. I have been emailed by an outreach co-ordinator, photographed by a social media specialist, and I even got to meet, and received official words of

appreciation, from two presidents! When I say interacting with BSUs and BSAs brings me great joy, I am talking about pure joy! A joy that I hold in my reserves and tap into when needed. I hope that in reading the reflections of our fellow Catholic teachers and union members that their words signal to you the far-reaching impact of the BSUs and BSAs in publicly funded Catholic schools across Ontario.

Thank you to the Catholic teachers from across Ontario who shared their thoughts on being a staff advisor to a BSU or BSA.



Tia Duke with Bishop P.F. Reding C.S.S. BSU Co-President Dunmininu Oyegbola.

Affinity spaces create validation, visibility, and stability for students. They allow for students to enter a safe space and forge a brave space. They give students an opportunity to access information and services to support them throughout their educational journey. Currently, we see them in select secondary schools – this is not enough. We need to see them in elementary schools. These are critical formation years for our Black students.

Lyanda Pugliese

St. Francis Xavier Catholic Secondary School
Dufferin-Peel Secondary Unit

As an experienced Black high school teacher, and now as an equity consultant, I have had the privilege to personally witness how truly inspiring and transformative Black students' affinity spaces are. I have seen students light up and come alive in these safer, soul-healing spaces, where they shared their lived experiences unfiltered and uninterrupted. I have seen them

embrace their authentic selves, feeling empowered and uplifting one another. Supporting BSAs has not only deepened my commitment to fostering inclusivity, but has also profoundly contributed to my growth as a Catholic teacher. Guiding my fellow educators in centring Black voices within their respective school communities has strengthened my connections with them, allowing me to learn from the wisdom of their experience, their kindness, and positive energy. #TrulyBlessed #Grateful

Jolly-Béatrice Toussaint

Ottawa Unit

Young, Gifted, and Black (YGB) at St. Gregory the Great is a place where Black students in Grades 1 to 8 can go to feel heard, speak their truth, and know that they are not alone. YGB was born from student voices. Black students recognized a need for a space dedicated to Black students. When the students approached me, a white teacher, I knew that my role in the group would be working in the background. I have learned that these spaces are sacred. I have been blessed to witness the magic that happens when Black students gather in a space that is protected and students are free to be themselves.

Danielle McKay

St. Gregory the Great Catholic Elementary School
Halton Elementary Unit

The BSU is a safe space for Black students to celebrate their culture and heritage, and share their thoughts, feelings, and views regarding the issues that affect our Black student population. It has been inspiring to see our students become young Black

leaders who educate others about Black history and culture, advocate for change in our schools and society, and empower others to stand up against anti-Black racism and promote diversity and inclusion in their daily lives.

Jennifer Wilson

St. Patrick High School
Thunder Bay Secondary Unit

Being an advisor to the BSU has been a transformative experience. It is not just about providing a safe space for Black learners, but also about fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. The stories, connections, learning, and joys have deepened my understanding of the unique challenges that our students face and has enriched my approach as a teacher. It is a reminder that education is not one-size-fits-all, and that every student brings a valuable perspective to the learning environment as they develop as holistic Catholic leaders.

Anthony Pugliese

Notre Dame Catholic Secondary School
Halton Secondary Unit

Our BSA is a space where leaders are made – a safe space, a brave space, and a comfortable space where our students feel heard and supported in community. Students build strength together, find and use their voice together, and create their joy together, all in preparation to stand tall together. Our BSA prepares Black students for their future, helping them on their life journey.

Allison Parsons and Natasha Bhoorasingh

Cardinal Leger Catholic Secondary School
Dufferin-Peel Secondary Unit

Meet two amazing Black Catholic teachers

It is truly a blessing when one is fortunate to cross paths with generous individuals who are willing to share the lessons they have learned to inspire others – that is all we can hope to do. In honour of Black History Month, it is with deep gratitude that I highlight the milestones of two Catholic teachers who personify Black excellence. When they agreed to be featured in this article, both Doreen Bonsu and Ann Marie Vanneste emphasized that they hoped to showcase milestones in their respective career journeys to send messages to their colleagues about advocacy, building bridges, and having the courage to be, and to make, the change we hope to see in this world. It is my privilege to introduce Doreen and Ann Marie to Catholic teachers across Ontario.

Doreen Bonsu

The future-dream chaser

Doreen Bonsu is a visionary, which is demonstrated by what she has accomplished very early in her teaching career. A history and religion teacher at Bishop Reding Catholic Secondary School in Milton, Doreen has received recognition for excellence in teaching from the English Language Arts Network of Ontario. In 2022, she piloted the first ever history course about the African Canadian experience in the Halton Catholic District School Board. Doreen's love of learning and heart for social justice have led her to create solutions to close gaps in learning when it comes to Black Studies curriculum development.

As Doreen journeys through her ninth year of teaching, she is working to complete her Master of Education in Social Justice Education, with a specialization in Educational Policy. When she speaks of equitable and just education systems, her focus is on well-being. In our conversation, Doreen reflected on what it would mean to create spaces where Black women speak, are listened to, and are supported in their leadership – *full stop*. A future where an innovative anti-racism leader like herself can thrive because she has personal, community, and layered system level supports.

Doreen challenged me to imagine – or reimagine – what it would be like to lead without unnecessary obstacles or to cease the injury-causing, emotional heavy lifting of advocating for

change in publicly funded Catholic education systems, especially as Black women teachers. Imagine.

When I asked this visionary what motivates her to continual action – the change she wants to see – she spoke of her faith, family, and of being grounded because, as she says, “I know who I am, and I know where my people are from.” Being a proud Ghanaian Canadian who is very much connected to Ghana, Doreen knows her family lineage, is connected to her culture, and knows how it shapes her understanding of herself.

Doreen is confident, she is rooted in her faith in God, and she is invested in helping her students find their confidence, to hear God's call to be the best version of themselves, and to dream big. Her investment in student voice and achievement is evident in how she speaks with learners in the Bishop Reding Black Student Union, and how they respond to her as their teacher advisor.

Intrinsically motivated to learn and do more, Doreen took a personal leave of absence last year, from February to March, to participate in the Visiting International Educator Program, a teaching abroad program at the most prestigious secondary school in Ghana: the Ghana International School (GIS), where the motto is “understanding each other.”

I asked Doreen what made her apply to the program, and she responded with a big smile, “It gave me an opportunity to connect two things I love: teaching and Ghana.” As she described the transformative experience, my heart opened when I heard Doreen explain a lightness she felt while being a guest teacher on campus. Recalling the odd feeling of an additional weight being removed on her first day on the job, not worrying about microaggressions, and referencing the happiness she felt seeing an entire school run by people who looked just like her, looked like us. I chuckled as Doreen emphasized that it applied to everyone, from the “principal to IT.” But it is what she shared from a journal entry while she was in Ghana that made me take pause. “I never knew how exhausted I was until I saw how happy I am,” she said.



Doreen Bonsu with GIS students.



Doreen Bonsu at an afterschool GIS science workshop.

Doreen spoke with fondness of the teachers and education staff committed to the success of the learners. Innovative, hardworking, and extremely professional educators, who never spoke ill of children or colleagues, and were open to learning regardless of career stage.

The focus of GIS is to foster learners who innovate and think about global social impact. Every Wednesday, the entire school participates in extracurricular activities. Outreach is a priority in the GIS experiential programming, where students visit various local schools to work with students with disabilities or to run an afterschool science workshop. These learners are from all over the world, will most likely study abroad for their post-secondary studies, and are well positioned to understand the world outside of high school.

Finally, as we ended our interview, Doreen highlighted the impact of the words of wisdom offered to her from a one-on-one conversation with GIS's CEO, Dr. Mary Ashun, where she advised her to "chase experiences." How fitting.

“

Doreen Bonsu and Ann Marie Vanneste emphasized that they hoped to showcase milestones in their respective career journeys to send messages to their colleagues about advocacy, building bridges, and having the courage to be, and to make, the change we hope to see in this world.

Ann Marie Vanneste

The legacy of a dream maker

My first impression of Ann Marie Vanneste is that she is a passionate and energetic teacher. My body language changed just speaking to her on the phone. There is a warmth in her enthusiastic tone, which made me sit up and focus.

Twenty-five years into her career, she has been dedicated to investing in the All Saints High School community in Kanata since 2001. Ann Marie joked about being carried out of the school as she reflected on being closer to retirement than the beginning of her teaching career. When I inquired about what motivates her to be so driven as a teacher now, Ann Marie focused on the dignity of every person and how blessed she is to be a teacher, simply saying "I see the beauty in every child" and that "teaching is a privilege and I love what I do."

In fall of 2023, Ann Marie received the news that she was a recipient of the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence, and that she would be meeting Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to receive the prestigious honour, as the third Black educator to ever receive the national award – and the first from the Ottawa Catholic School Board (OCSB).

In speaking about the prestigious honour, and subsequent recognition by the local media and OCSB, Ann Marie described wanting to leverage the interest in highlighting her win to share key messages to inspire others. What struck me about Ann Marie is her determination and understanding of her call to help others find and shine their light.

As Ann Marie reflected on her identity as a Black woman with mixed roots, and her unique experience of being one of six adopted children – three Black and three white – to white parents, she described how that identity allows her to navigate



Ann Marie Vanneste receiving the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

difficult conversations in a unique way. She noted why it is even more important for her to use her voice and encourage others to do the same, sharing that it is her parents and family that always encouraged her to dream big and shine her light.

As the only Black teacher at All Saints High School, teaching many subjects, including civics, careers, religion, performance dance, and learning strategies, working with identified students who will enter the world of work, Ann Marie noted that the anti-oppression work that she has been recognized for has not been done in isolation. With pride she shared how administrators, colleagues, and students have collectively done the challenging work to support initiatives that dismantle anti-Black racism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination. She credits her school community for working collaboratively to support the Best Buddies program, and the Black Student Association (BSA) that has fostered a deep sense of inclusion and belonging evidenced by the way in which the students speak about their relationship with “Ms. Vanneste.”

When speaking about organizing a school trip, where 900 students screened the movie “Till,” Ann Marie emphasized that though the film was incredibly impactful, it was the work the staff and students in all subject areas did before and after watching the film that had the most impact. Ann Marie credits her colleagues for their willingness to engage in challenging conversations about race and identity, to create a school community that centres maintaining a healthy school culture. She describes the All Saints BSA, whose motto is “Our Roots Run Deep,” as a space for all people of all colours and learners of all racial identities to work and celebrate the lived experience of Black students and combat anti-Black racism.

Tia Duke is a Staff Officer in the Professional Development department at OECTA Provincial Office.

Resources

Catholic teachers continue to do everything we can to challenge and deconstruct systemic anti-Black racism in our schools and in our society, as we work towards a Canada free from racial discrimination and hatred. To support that work throughout Black History Month, and in our classrooms every day, the Association has put together a non-exhaustive list of online materials from various sources that may provide a starting point for you to explore, learn, and build understanding about the history and contributions of Black Canadians to our society, as well as continued struggles against racism and oppression.

Click [HERE](#) to access Black History Month resources for Catholic teachers.

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OECTA'S PROVINCIAL LTD PLAN

What you need to know about cancelling your long-term disability coverage

By Ontario Teachers Insurance Plan

Most members are in a highly-vulnerable financial position when they are confronted with a loss of income during a lengthy or permanent disability. The OECTA provincial long-term disability (LTD) insurance plan provides a safety net that will replace a percentage of your salary and provide pension plan protection if you are unable to work because of an illness or injury.

This being said, it is possible to terminate your LTD coverage, in which case you will no longer have premiums deducted from your pay.

Three scenarios

There are three scenarios in which you might be able to cancel your LTD insurance:

Scenario 1 60 per cent unreduced service pension	Scenario 2 Upcoming retirement	Scenario 3 Age 65
<p>You are eligible for a 60 per cent unreduced service pension now.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>You are eligible for a 60 per cent unreduced service pension within the later of the next 110 working days or expiration of sick leave, and in no event more than 24 months.</p>	<p>Your board-approved retirement date is within the next 110 working days.</p>	<p>You have reached the end of the month in which you turned age 65.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>You will reach the end of the month in which you turn age 65, within the later of the next 110 working days or expiration of sick leave, and in no event more than 24 months.</p>

- 1 You are eligible for a 60 per cent unreduced service pension or will be, within the later of either: the next 110 working days, or the expiration of your sick leave credits.
 - To qualify for an unreduced pension you must have reached the “85 factor,” meaning your age and years of qualifying service add up to 85.
 - To qualify for a 60 per cent unreduced pension, you *must meet the above criteria with* 30 years of credited service.
- 2 You have reached the end of the month in which you turned 65, or you will reach the end of the month in which you will turn 65, within the later of either: the next 110 working days, or the expiration of your sick leave credits.
- 3 Your retirement date is within the next 110 working days, and you have notified both the Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan and your school board.

Eligible until retirement

You should know that you are not required to terminate your LTD coverage simply because you have notified your board of your intention to retire. You are still eligible for coverage up to the date of your retirement, and you have the right to make a claim if you become disabled prior to this date. If approved, LTD benefits would be payable until: you recover, you become eligible for a 60 per cent unreduced service pension, or you reach the end of the month following your 65th birthday (as long as you were not receiving Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan benefits).

You might have sound reasons for cancelling your LTD coverage and discontinuing your premium payments, but you should carefully consider your options. Please note that, if you terminate your LTD in Scenario 2 and become disabled before retirement, you **will not** be eligible for LTD. You likely do not want to be in a situation where you are unable to work and are not receiving sufficient income. Also note that coverage cannot be cancelled retroactively.

If you wish to terminate your LTD coverage, you should complete an Application for Coverage Termination. Submit the completed application to your local OECTA unit office at least two months prior to the desired cancellation date to ensure the board stops deducting LTD premiums on time. Be sure to include the required supporting documentation.

Your LTD benefits plan is sponsored by OECTA Provincial and administered by the Ontario Teachers Insurance Plan (OTIP). Please do not call your school board for assistance; direct any questions to your local OECTA unit office.

What is OTIP?

The Ontario Teachers Insurance Plan (OTIP) is a not-for-profit insurance advocate that is part of the education community. OTIP is governed, led, and inspired by the four education affiliates and their local leaders. OTIP's products and services include a full range of group and individual insurance from your group benefit plans and long-term disability coverage to individual insurance products, such as your home and auto coverage.

Click [HERE](#) to learn more about OTIP coverage.

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Looking for a “sign”

By Simon Dallimore

Illustration by @Login, Shutterstock.com.

It was the early afternoon of Christmas Eve and I had just dropped off our contribution to the family dinner, which we would enjoy later that night at our nephew and his wife's home. It was a cold, overcast, and drizzly day, and despite the Christmas music playing on the radio, the weather made it difficult to be "in the Christmas spirit."

On the drive home, I passed by a Catholic school and a church. Both buildings had a sign out front with a message. The message on the school sign said, "May hope, peace, joy, and love fill your Christmas holiday." It was a welcoming message and it put a smile on my face. The Advent message struck me like a beacon of light on the dreary day. It helped with the Christmas spirit.

The church was located a couple of blocks down the road from the school. It also had a sign outside. This sign simply read, "Christmas Eve service at 7 and 11 p.m. Regular Sunday services at 10 a.m." I assumed that this same message had been up for a while. The church itself was shrouded in darkness, blending in with the weather of the day. It was not seasonal, and it was certainly not welcoming.

The two signs stuck with me throughout the rest of the day. I thought about the different "signs" we wear on any given day. How do our "signs" impact those around us? How do other people see us? Do our signs make people feel welcome and accepted, or do they make people feel shut out and excluded?

One of my favourite Biblical passages is Mark 12:41-44. This is the story of the widow in the temple. Jesus is in the temple near the place where offerings were made, and he watched as the wealthy members of the synagogue put large amounts of money into the treasury. He also watched as a widow quietly put two small copper coins in the treasury, far less in value than anyone else. Jesus used this as a lesson and

told his disciples that the widow gave more than anyone else. She gave all that she had, which was in contrast to the wealthy, who gave a small fraction of their wealth.

This passage reminds me that it is important that we live our faith. Being faithful is not simply reciting prayers or being seen at Mass. Being faithful means that we need to live our faith each day. Living our faith should not be for show. Living our faith should be the way we treat everyone and the way we approach all situations.

Matthew 25:35-45 tells us that we need to take care of the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the strangers, and those in need. When Jesus was asked about this, he replied that when we did this for those in need, then we did it to him. Jesus tells us that we need to live our faith, not for rewards, but as a matter of course. In 2 Corinthians 5:7, we are reminded that "We walk by faith, not by sight." For me, faith is about loving your neighbour and treating each other with respect. Faith is not about passing judgement, but about accepting each others' differences.

I have shared in the past that my wife and I were very fortunate to have lived and worked in Japan for a year. Early on in our year there, my wife had made an offhand comment at one of the schools she worked. Someone had asked her how we were settling in. She mentioned that we were still learning how to navigate the grocery stores. She said that it was challenging, as we were not able to read the labels. A couple of days later, bags of western-style groceries showed up on our doorstep. We never found out who dropped off the groceries, but it made us feel welcomed and loved. The person who dropped off the groceries was not looking for recognition. They wanted to make sure that we had what we needed.

This act of compassion is something that I use in order to remind myself of the importance of living our faith. Our

actions should not be for recognition, but should come from a place of love and compassion.

It is easy to pay lip-service to our faith. Living our faith can be a lot more challenging. We all put up signs for others to read. What signs do we put up in our classrooms and our daily lives? Do we create a safe space for everyone? Do all people feel heard and supported? Are we willing to take these actions even if we are not recognized for them? Put simply, are we living our faith? My goal for 2024 is to think about the signs that I put up and do my best to live my faith.

Simon Dallimore is a Staff Officer in the Counselling and Member Services department at OECTA Provincial Office.

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Being faithful means that we need to live our faith each day. Living our faith should not be for show.

Why Ontario teachers have limited freedom of speech

By Bruno Muzzi

With ongoing global conflicts dominating the news, many members have inquired about their right to speak up and speak out. While it may seem clear that you have a right to freedom of expression, there are many layers that need to be considered. This includes understanding the applicable sections of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, your rights and obligations as an employee (of a school board), and your rights and obligations as a teacher.

In Canada, under Section 2(b) of the Charter, we have freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication. However, it is important to note that these rights are not absolute. Each right is subject to limitations, as outlined in Section 1 of the Charter. Limitations can be justified if they are considered reasonable. This means that while you have the right to express your opinions and beliefs, there are circumstances where limitations might apply, such as if your expression infringes upon the rights of others, leads to hate speech, or disrupts the learning environment.

As employees, as well as school board employees, you must also be cognizant that your off-duty conduct, such as posting on social media platforms, can lead to discipline by your employer.

It is well-established that if the employer can demonstrate that your off-duty conduct could have a detrimental impact on school/board operations, then discipline is justified. Detrimental impact would include behaviours that negatively affect the employer's reputation, and/or cause other workers to refuse, or be unwilling to work with, that employee.

As professionals, teachers are regulated by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT). The OCT uses its ethical standards of care, trust, respect, and integrity to identify a teacher's responsibilities and commitment. The OCT applies its Standards of Practice to assess a teacher's professional judgement. In its advisory on the use of electronic communication and social media, the OCT provides guidance for teachers to reflect upon.

Click [HERE](#) to read the OCT's professional advisory on the use of electronic communication and social media.



CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS



... if found guilty of the offence and if the punishment for the offence has varied between the time of commission and the time of sentencing, to the extent of the lesser punishment. 12. Everyone has the right not to be subjected to cruel and unusual treatment or punishment. 13. A witness who testifies in any proceedings has the right not to have any incriminating evidence so used to incriminate that witness in any other proceedings, except in a prosecution for perjury or for the giving of contradictory evidence. 14. A party in any proceedings who does not understand or speak the language in which the proceedings are conducted or who is deaf has the right to the assistance of an interpreter.

Equality Rights

15. (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without

discrimination. 19. (1) Either English or French may be used by any person in, or in any pleading in or process issuing from, any court established by Parliament. (2) Either English or French may be used by any person in, or in any pleading in or process issuing from, any court of New Brunswick. 20. (1) Any member of the public in Canada has the right to communicate with, and to receive available services from, any head or central office of an institution of the Parliament or government of Canada in English or French, and has the same right with respect to any other office of any such institution where (a) there is a significant demand for communications with and services from that office in such language; or (b) due to the nature of the office, it is reasonable that communications with and services from that office be available in both English and French. (2) Any member of the public in New Brunswick has the right to communicate with, and to receive available services from, any office of an institution of the legislature or government of New Brunswick in English

Enforcement

24. (1) Anyone whose rights or freedoms, as guaranteed by this Charter, have been infringed or denied may apply to a court of competent jurisdiction to obtain such remedy as the court considers appropriate and just in the circumstances. (2) Where, in proceedings under subsection (1), a court concludes that evidence was obtained in a manner that infringed or denied any rights or freedoms guaranteed by this Charter, the evidence shall be excluded if it is established that, having regard to all the circumstances, the admission of it in the proceedings would bring the administration of justice into disrepute.

General

25. The guarantee in this Charter of certain rights and freedoms shall not be construed so as to abrogate or derogate from any aboriginal, treaty or other rights or freedoms that pertain to the aboriginal peoples of Canada including (a) any rights or freedoms that have been recognized by the Royal Proclamation of October 7, 1763; and (b) any rights or freedoms that now exist by way of land claims agreements or may be so acquired. 26. The guarantee in this Charter of certain rights and freedoms shall not be construed as denying the existence of any other rights or freedoms that exist in Canada. 27. This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians. 28. Notwithstanding anything in this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons. 29. Nothing in this Charter abrogates or derogates from any rights or privileges guaranteed by or under the Constitution of Canada in respect of denominational, separate or dissentient schools. 30. A reference in this Charter to a province or to the legislative assembly or legislature of a province shall be deemed to include a reference to the Yukon Territory and the Northwest Territories, or to the appropriate legislative authority thereof, as the case may be. 31. Nothing in this Charter extends the legislative powers of any body or authority.

Application of Charter

32. (1) This Charter applies (a) to the Parliament and government of

The advisory is worth reading in its entirety, but two key pieces of guidance can be summarized as follows:

- » Avoid making online criticism about students, colleagues, your employer, or others within the school community.
- » Before posting, take 24 to 48 hours to consider whether any part of your post will reflect poorly on you, your school, or the teaching profession.

As the American journalist Ambrose Bierce wrote, “Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.”

Both the Supreme Court of Canada and the OCT have rendered verdicts that uphold decisions where teachers were disciplined or fired for their off-duty conduct. For example, Paul Fromm, a long-serving secondary school teacher in the Peel Board of Education (now Peel District School Board) was terminated by his employer because he participated in activities and organizations that supported white supremacists and promoted antisemitic views, despite the fact that his racist views were not promoted in the classroom. The OCT found him guilty of professional misconduct and revoked his license. Similarly, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the discipline of Malcolm Ross, a former New Brunswick school teacher who was reprimanded because of antisemitic views he expressed outside of the classroom.

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**Speak when you are angry
and you will make the best
speech you will ever regret.**

Of course, we have only scratched the surface of this topic. Even though there are some limitations as to how teachers can express themselves publicly, it is still possible for you to have an opinion as a teacher. As I have written previously, that opinion cannot be contrary to the Ontario *Human Rights Code*. If you are prepared to engage in intelligent and informed discourse you are definitely on the right path. Keep in mind that social media is not a platform conducive to discussion, or nuanced debate. When speaking (or posting to social media), whether in the staff room or in public, if you imagine that you are speaking to a parent or another academic (your favourite university professor), you can better ensure that your choice of words, and your tone, will reflect the true professional that you are.

Bruno Muzzi is Department Head in the Counselling and Member Services department at OECTA Provincial Office.

NEW YEAR, NEW YOU?

By Michelle Despault

The new year is a natural time for self-reflection – when we look back over the past year at our experiences and our accomplishments, and consider where and how we want to evolve as we move forward into the next chapter of our lives. It can be a time for a fresh start, to begin anew, to commit or recommit to those things that we desire for ourselves.

For many, this reflection manifests in the form of a New Year's resolution. And just in case you were wondering, a *Forbes* magazine poll found that the top New Year's resolutions for 2024 include: improved fitness (48 per cent), improved finances (38 per cent), improved mental health (36 per cent), weight loss (34 per cent), and improved diet (32 per cent).

Did you resolve to undertake some personal growth or commit to changing a habit or behaviour that no longer serves you? Personally, I am committing to reducing my consumption of Starbucks coffee (those who know me know that I am pretty obsessed... okay, very obsessed). I also want to take more time for myself instead of always prioritizing the needs of others; I want to set and honour boundaries in my relationships with others, and I want to feel more joyful and alive in my everyday life. These are all pretty tall orders, and to fulfil them I will *literally* need to become a different version of myself. I am going to need to change my perspective and understanding of who I am and how others relate to me.

It is not surprising that so many resolutions do not last very long. The same *Forbes* article noted that, on average, respondents' resolutions last only three months. While we may have an initial burst of motivation, lasting and meaningful change often requires a shift in our belief systems and the implementation of new structures to help us alter long-held patterns of thought and behaviour.

Motivation is an inside job

Let's start at the beginning: what is motivating our desire for change? When we consider why we want to change, often that motivation is external to ourselves. Extrinsic motivators can include rewards, recognition, or fulfilling the expectations of another person. The problem is that extrinsic factors can change over time, their attractiveness can wane, and when the going gets tough, the reward may not be judged to be worth the effort.

The life force behind any change is your sincere desire for change, to improve or evolve yourself. You want to undertake the work needed because the end result will satisfy some need for autonomy, connectedness, acceptance, or the like. It is the difference between doing something because you *should*, because it is expected of you, or because it is a means to an end, versus doing something because you enjoy it, you gain a level of fulfilment from it, or you recognize and relish the potential for your personal growth in the doing of the activity or the achieving of the goal. This internal desire is often called our *why*.

While external motivation may get you started, your internal motivation, your *why*, is what will keep you going. When the going gets tough, it is your *why* that will keep you connected to your goal and help you to keep moving forward. Write down your *why*, perhaps on a sticky note, and put it anywhere and everywhere you need to for your daily dose of true motivation.

Who are you being?

Let's face it, when we awoke on January 1 we were still the same person who went to sleep on December 31. We did not suddenly become a "morning person," become capable of sitting through a 45-minute meditation without falling asleep, feel comfortable leaving the dirty dishes in the sink when no one else in the house cleans them, or have the confidence to say "no" to the extraneous demands of other people. The person behind the thoughts and behaviours did not change; thus, to achieve the success we desire, we may literally need to evolve who we are being and relate to ourselves differently.

Consider what it would feel like to be future you – how will you feel when you lose the weight, meditate every day, or pay off those bills? Take time each day to reflect on, and be present with, these feelings – the confidence, pride, freedom – whatever it may be. Visualize what your life will be like when you have reached your goal. What will you be doing? How will things be different? Start to act as if that future version of you is your reality now. This will help to create new patterns of thought.

My friend decided to give up alcohol this year. When we went out for dinner with friends the other night, they were offered a glass and replied, "no thanks, I am trying to quit." While it is great that they had the willpower to turn down the glass, it is clear that they still related to themselves as a drinker, albeit in the process of becoming a non-drinker. A much more powerful place to come from would have been to say, "no thanks, I don't drink!" This mentality reinforces their new identity as a

non-drinker and has them living into their future, rather than continually being present to who they were.

Every day, every moment, consider if you are being that yesterday version of you that wants something different for yourself, or are you present to a new version of you, embodying the change you aspire to. Do you see that new version of you as being achievable or unattainable? Acting as though you are that person can help you to build your belief in what is possible, and, in turn, will have you making decisions and taking actions in alignment with where you want to go.

Believe

I love the quote by American author and motivational speaker Wayne Dyer that says, “You’ll see it, when you believe it.” Believing in yourself, that you can achieve what you set out for yourself, is an important factor in our success. So often we doubt our capabilities because we have not accomplished something before – we have never done a specific job, or lost the weight, or ran a 5k race. We have no evidence that success is assured so we doubt our capabilities. Or we have evidence to the contrary – we have tried in the past and have not been successful – so we sow the seeds of self-doubt, and we are unconsciously sabotaging our efforts and working against ourselves without even realizing it.

We are all capable of amazing things, so much more than we can even imagine. Will there be failure along the way – yes! Will it be difficult and will you doubt your desire to continue – yes! But you know that. It is all part of the process. Have faith that you have everything you need, believe that you will be successful, and watch how the changes unfold – possibly in ways you never expected.

The real secret sauce

Love yourself! That is it. Love yourself right now, as you are – embrace every part of you that you feel is lacking, needs changing, that you feel is not enough. Let go of the belief that there is something wrong with you. That something needs to be different for you to be complete, loveable, worthy, fulfilled, or happy. Introspection is like a double-edged sword – on the one hand, the future-casting we do is exciting and energizing, but at the same time it keeps us present to what is lacking in our lives. And if you think that your desire for change does not have at its core some form of not “enoughness,” look deeper.

You are whole, complete, and perfect as you are! The more you love yourself, the more you will want the best for yourself. Treating yourself better will not be a chore, it will not be something that you must force yourself to do, but rather something you want to do. It does not mean that you will stop wanting to strive for more or different in your life, but you will be doing it from a place of enhancing rather than fixing.

As you think about the changes you are setting out to make in your life this year, consider where they are stemming from – believing something is wrong, lacking, or incomplete, or a place of love for yourself, wanting to enhance your life and give more to yourself and those around you?

Progress over perfection

Change is hard. For each of us there are ways of being and patterns of thought that are stubborn, that do not want to be retrained, that want to keep us stuck in our comfort zone. Change can also be scary. We are moving out of spaces where we feel comfortable and into spaces where we do not know what to expect or how to navigate the expectations of others.

Give yourself grace and space to navigate the feelings that arise, the desire to not do the thing you know you need to do to effect the change you want. Forgive yourself when you skip your meditation, eat the cake at the party, do not stand up for yourself when someone is rude to you, or lose your crap when you come home and dinner is not made and the house is a disaster. Being perfect is not the point, progress is.

Change also takes time. Too often we have unreasonable expectations around how much time it will take to effect meaningful change. If we do not see immediate results, we give up or change tactics. Progress is about building momentum, not about being perfect. Taking two steps forward and one backward, is still moving forward.

What would constitute progress for you? Waking up earlier just one day in the week is progress. Changing your eating habits for one meal a day is progress. Having someone else make dinner one night a week is progress. Having one difficult conversation is progress.

Often, a barrier to our success can simply be how we are measuring it. We do not give ourselves enough credit for all the small steps forward we take, focusing instead on only the giant leaps. Whether you take baby steps or giant leaps, as long as you are moving in the direction you want to go, you will eventually get there.

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**You are whole, complete,
and perfect as you are!**

**The more you love yourself,
the more you will want the
best for yourself.**

Michelle Despault is Director of Member Communications and Public Affairs in the Government Relations and Public Affairs department at OECTA Provincial Office.

HUMANISM AND SPIRITUALITY IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

By Clayton Johnson

Thomas Moore, Thomas Merton, Helen Keller, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Paulo Freire, and Margaret Mead – these varied individuals, from different eras, nevertheless share much in common. They were gifted communicators. They were activists. They inspired many people. And they left a lasting legacy. Interestingly, on the question of what it means to be human, they are also some of the people that we can look to when engaging the Grade 10 and 12 religion curriculum expectations.

Like each of us, these figures had both strengths and weaknesses, becoming who they were through their personal relationships and connections to the larger community. Sociologists like to remind us that “no one is an island.” Jesus also realized this when he prayed for unity and St. Paul referred to this in his analogy of the body: “one body but many parts.”

Humanism and spirituality are widely and variously defined. They can have premodern, modern, and postmodern connotations. Broadly speaking, humanism is characterized as a philosophy that centres human beings as having the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape their own lives – it is a doctrine of thought that prizes rationality and reason.

Humanism as a doctrine is a value-neutral approach; however, history shows us the drastically different outcomes that have resulted from humanist approaches. For instance, we know that modernity gave us medical technology and emphasized

the principles of democracy. However, it also gave us the atomic bomb and colonialism. This is one of the reasons some theologians speak of “transcending and including,” more aptly described as “not throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” In the contemporary context, some have even encouraged us not to “throw the *rational* baby out with the *rationalist* bathwater.”

By contrast, in our world today, some appear to move into certain expressions of spirituality as a form of escapism. But can we really blame them? After all, the world can at times seem to be filled with nothing but tragedy – war, climate change, violence, racism, poverty, and inequality. When we take these things into consideration, it is easy to understand why some would strive to float above it all.

To master ourselves, some would say, is part of becoming human; however, few ever reach such heightened levels of transcendence. Most of us can still be triggered from time to time. Most of us still feel down from time to time. And even Jesus once turned the tables of the money changers in a fit of rage.

Yet, despite some of the hyperbole around spirituality (and I do mean hyperbole), we need not look further than the Internet to find negative descriptions of any of our favourite spiritual authors – many of us still find value in some expression of spirituality.

Personally, I find that any time I decide to spend more time in prayer and meditation, my attention is eventually drawn back to the human and the material. I suspect that this is

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Sociologists like to remind us that ‘no one is an island.’ Jesus also realized this when he prayed for unity and St. Paul referred to this in his analogy of the body: ‘one body but many parts.’

partially due to the fact that part of my focus during these times of prayer is on Jesus and Mary – which is likely the case for many others rooted in traditions of piety. Yet, some of my own inspirations, such as liberation theology and postmodern spirituality, encourage us to deconstruct any view of God that is created in our own image. This requires us to contemplate who Jesus and Mary were in their original cultural context. And here is where humanism and spirituality intersect.

Traditionally, we were taught to think of God as “out there somewhere,” favourably intervening on behalf of those who adhere to a correct moral theology. Moral theology is succinctly summarized in the commandment to love God and our neighbour as ourselves – yet some would *still* add a lot of outward piety. This view of God, as separate from us, underlies certain ideologies, such as American exceptionalism. Jesus, on the other hand, spoke *of, to, and as* God, (in the third-, second-, and first-person). Some spiritual authors, such as Richard Rohr and Paul R. Smith, have described this as an “Integral Trinity,” a 3D view of God that emphasizes God’s infinity, intimacy, and inner being. Jesus himself said, “the Kingdom of God is within you and around you everywhere.”

The theologian Jurgen Moltmann, a Lutheran theologian inspired by aspects of Catholic and Jewish theology, also viewed God very much from this perspective. Seeing God as in the universe and the universe as in God (or incarnational theology) very much underlies his view of the crucified Christ. In drawing on the Latin American tradition of liberation theology, Moltmann sees the cross as especially significant for those who have deeply identified with suffering. He was

especially moved by the feasting that occurs during Holy Week in the Latin American context, rather than exclusively on Easter Sunday. Ultimately, the crucified Christ reminds us that we are never separate from God, even in our suffering.

So, how might these modern and contemporary expressions relate back to the themes of humanism, spirituality, and Catholic education? Incarnational theology unites the human with the spiritual. Rooted in this understanding, in the soil of grace, we produce the fruit of good works. This is not about being outwardly perfect in every way but stems from within, intrinsically. It includes, as examples, accessibility, inclusion, diversity, and equity. It also includes what so many of us do in our classrooms every day when we emphasize universal design, while, at the same time, providing accommodations to students who experience learning challenges. Sometimes, we are more of a grace and blessing to others than what we give ourselves credit for. Yet, Christ still beckons us from the future, calling us to evolve towards the Kingdom of God that is now among us and yet to come.

Clayton Johnson is a member of the Toronto Secondary Unit and represents members with disabilities on the Association’s Diversity Advisory Board.



EDUCATION PROGRAMMING: fighting the democratic recession

By Filomena Ferraro

This past November, CIVIX, which manages the Student Vote program, celebrated its 20th anniversary in Toronto. During this celebration, guest speakers spoke to topics such as the crisis in democracies and civic education programming in classrooms across Canada and in many parts of South America.

CIVIX started its journey in 2003, establishing partnerships with all levels of government. Recognizing that engagement and voting are essential to a healthy democracy, the program seeks to address the challenges posed by divisive politics and the polarization of society. Teachers, on the frontiers of democracy, play a pivotal role as we witness a decline in trust in public institutions fueled by partisan politics and shifts in voting patterns. This environment of mistrust and polarization has led to what some call a “democratic recession.” As teachers, we can rely on the resources and programs provided by CIVIX to break this trend of political inaction and turn it into positive action through education.

CIVIX’s programs offer a transformative approach to learning about democracy in the classroom. As societies navigate the complexities of governance, fostering an understanding of democratic principles

at an early age becomes increasingly vital, especially considering the increase in the volume of misinformation coming from bad actors in the public space. CIVIX’s offerings empower students, helping them to become informed, engaged, and active citizens.

At its core, CIVIX’s programming is about its commitment to unpack the current democratic system. Through its programs, students are guided through the fundamental principles that strengthen democratic societies, such as civic responsibility, the rule of law, and the importance of active participation. By exploring these concepts, CIVIX programs help students cultivate a sense of civic duty and instill a deeper appreciation for the democratic process. The biggest takeaway is not surprising – a healthy democracy built on the foundation of engagement and voting.

Interactive learning

What sets the CIVIX program apart is its emphasis on interactive learning. Rather than relying solely on textbooks, students actively participate in simulated democratic processes. Through its programs, students can participate in mock elections, debates, and discussions that simulate real-world scenarios,

providing a hands-on experience that transcends traditional classroom boundaries. This experiential learning approach imparts theoretical knowledge and applies it through practical skills building, which is crucial for effective civic engagement.

Building critical thinking skills

Democracy thrives on an informed and critically-thinking citizenry. The CIVIX program nurtures these skills by encouraging students to analyze and evaluate information, debate respectfully, and consider multiple perspectives. By fostering critical thinking, the program equips students with the tools needed to navigate the complexities of a democratic society, enabling them to make informed decisions and identify misinformation.

Democracy in crisis

As CIVIX digs into the complexities of democracy, its programming acknowledges the challenges of a society in crisis. Distrust in government institutions has become widespread, especially among those aged 18 to 24, Indigenous communities, individuals with disabilities, and those from lower socio-economic communities. These vulnerable groups may be the first generation blocked from accessing

affordable housing, forced to work gig jobs, and influenced by the rise of hate and misinformation. This leads to apathy and anger, which can lead to further hate and a fixation on assigning blame. The complexities of these conditions are captured by the term “affective polarization,” where feelings towards one’s political group intensify while becoming more antagonistic towards others. It is a feeling that exists in the United States and is growing in Canada, contributing to a democratic recession.

What is causing the democratic recession? What is the solution?

CIVIX takes a critical stance on the root causes of this democratic recession. Economic inequality, conservative reactions to societal changes, populist politics, shifts in the social media landscape, and external influences contribute to democratic backsliding. The program emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, urging individuals to be discerning about the information they consume and the sources they trust.

The CIVIX program recognizes the symbiotic relationship between the classroom and the broader community. Through partnerships with local government entities, students gain firsthand insights into the workings of democracy beyond the school walls. Field trips to government offices, meetings with elected officials, and community projects bridge theoretical learning and real-world application, reinforcing the relevance of democratic principles in students’ lives.

Preparing future leaders

Beyond cultivating informed citizens, the CIVIX program plays a pivotal role in shaping future leaders. By empowering students with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to participate actively in civic life, the program nurtures a new generation of leaders committed to upholding democratic values. These emerging leaders are equipped to contribute meaningfully to the betterment of their communities and society at large.

The CIVIX program is a pillar in the ever-evolving education landscape, helping students aspire to a more engaged and democratic society. By fostering a deep understanding of democratic principles, encouraging interactive learning, building critical thinking skills, connecting classrooms to communities, and preparing future leaders, CIVIX is sowing the seeds of a vibrant and

participatory democracy. As students embark on this journey, they not only learn about democracy, but become engaged citizens in a world that needs more activists.

Engaging future generations

Two noteworthy initiatives, CTRL-F and PoliTalks, showcase CIVIX’s commitment to addressing contemporary educational challenges, including helping students navigate the online world.

CTRL-F: Navigating the Online World focuses on helping students navigate digital landscapes in an era of increasing online complexity. Acknowledging the challenges posed by biased information and misinformation, this initiative equips students with the tools to critically evaluate online content. It is a digital media literacy program developed to help students identify false and misleading information online and locate credible sources. Named for the keyboard shortcut for “find,” CTRL-F teaches quick, evidence-based strategies for evaluating the reliability of sources and claims.

Click [HERE](#) to learn more about CTRL-F and explore the program’s digital media literacy resources.

PoliTalks: Fostering Constructive Discussion is CIVIX’s newest program, which aims to create spaces where constructive discussion can thrive. Recognizing the necessity of discussing controversial issues, as part of a commitment to supporting a more engaged citizenry, PoliTalks confronts the challenge of political polarization. The program uses “value cards,” and by having discussions about their biases, students are encouraged to analyze their own perspectives and how values influence views and priorities. These activities help students practice active listening, perspective-taking, and respectful self-expression skills. Students build relevant contextual awareness and the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to participate constructively in political discussions.

Click [HERE](#) to learn more about PoliTalks’s offerings, which help students cultivate the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to participate constructively in political discussions.

Challenges and opportunities

CIVIX recognizes the challenges faced by teachers and educators. A survey conducted by CIVIX revealed that while 93 per cent of teachers agree that discussing controversial issues is essential, only 55 per cent felt that it is encouraged in their schools. Political polarization remains a significant hurdle, with 57 per cent of teachers identifying it as a major challenge. When asked to rank what they thought their school should prioritize regarding citizenship education, more teachers selected “teaching students to be able to have constructive discussions with people who share different opinions” over any other option. Overall, teachers felt the school system should focus on classroom discussions.

As CIVIX celebrates its 20th anniversary, it is not only reflecting on past achievements but also looking forward to the challenges and opportunities ahead. CIVIX’s educational programming remains a guiding force, preparing students to be active contributors in creating a flourishing democratic legacy where they connect social issues with political issues. In classrooms engaging in Student Vote, CTRL-F, PoliTalks, and other CIVIX programs, the future of democracy is not just learned; it is actively shaped by inspiring the engaged and informed leaders of future generations.

Politics can be divisive, leading to polarization, misinformation, and distrust in public institutions. Teachers are on the frontier of helping students – future leaders and voters – to overcome our democratic recession.

Click [HERE](#) to get inspired and learn more about all the programs (and future programs) CIVIX offers to students and teachers.

Filomena Ferraro is a Staff Officer in the Government Relations and Public Affairs department at OECTA Provincial Office.



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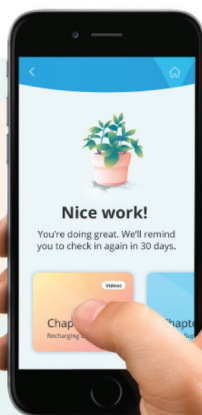
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Of TRIVIAL matters

By Gian Marcon

On a recent podcast, I heard the host observe that trivia evenings are a social phenomenon that occupies a space that lies somewhere between the experience of going out for dinner and sitting in on a live performance. In my experience, trivia events, when at their best, provide an opportunity for cordial social interactions with friends and strangers who are on your team or with whom you are competing. When combined with a leisurely pint and some witty banter, these events almost always make for a fun challenge and pleasurable overall experience.

Since 2017, my partner and I have been frequenting weekly trivia events at two different pubs in Brampton. The experiences are enjoyable, and we look forward to the mental gymnastics and social interaction with our fellow trivia enthusiasts and friends. Teams are randomly composed of three or four individuals and standardized answer sheets are provided. We all chip in two dollars and the winning team shares the pot.

While the two trivia events we attend have different formats, the common shared feature is that they are not delivered by companies or individuals who are hired to provide either the content or the delivery of the questions. Instead, participants sign up and volunteer to prepare and host events on a rotational basis.

The competition, while central to an event where score is kept, does not overshadow the table talk and gentle

ribbing that invariably occurs both within teams and at times, across tables. Social trivia quizzes have certainly experienced a resurgence of late, but they have been around for a long time. They have also evolved over the years to incorporate more social interaction, which in our case is the reason we attend. The approximate two-hour timeline for a full trivia game allows for pre- and post-trivia conversation, with the added bonus of usually affording the opportunity to be home by 10 p.m. on a weeknight (or for dinner on a Sunday). So, while knowing or discovering new information may be interesting, it is only a fraction of what makes trivia nights worthwhile.

As a retired OECTA member and Staff Officer at Provincial Office, in my seventh decade of life, I have come to appreciate any opportunity to exercise my brain. I have read numerous articles espousing that regularly participating in mental challenges creates enhanced connectivity between the brain's nerve cells. There is a consensus that immersing oneself in activities involving mental recall – especially as we age – contributes to improving the acuity and speed of our respective memories.

As alluded to earlier, participating in regular trivia-related events – especially those that are based on team play – fosters an environment where existing social bonds can be enhanced and new connections formed. The team dynamic and the requirement for teamwork when answering questions provide built-in icebreakers. In this way, trivia is a great

way to meet and interact with new people. It is not surprising, then, that there is increasing evidence that the act of socializing in the non-threatening, cooperative environment that trivia events provide, can also amplify and maintain levels of cognition. In addition, playing trivia in such an environment, and under these conditions, can reduce stress levels and their detrimental effects. In essence, playing trivia on a team regularly can contribute to our overall wellness for reasons that can be both game-related as well as socially-based.

I mentioned earlier, the trivia nights that we attend involve participants regularly volunteering to deliver the weekly trivia questions. In so doing, the weekly “hosts” are presented with a great learning opportunity as they research and craft a trivia experience that will resonate with the range of ages and interests of attendees.

Trivia events are more than just a chance for some amiable rivalry, they are also opportunities to support social engagement and to learn new things. The benefits of this enhanced social interaction and mental exercise are just two of the motivations that draw me to two of our local trivia events – you may want to consider checking out your local trivia scene as well.

Gian Marcon is a retired Catholic teacher and former Staff Officer at OECTA Provincial Office.



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