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System Leaders & Assurance: Ensuring Student Success



Effective Stakeholder Engagement within a Small Rural Charter School

By Teresa Di Ninno, CAPE Public Charter School

The Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence, commonly referred to as CAPE, adopted a collaborative decision-making governance model since its inception in 1994 because of the belief that the school, parents and community working together in support of student learning is the optimal structure to meeting student needs. The highly-engaging partnership between these stakeholders was what developed CAPE as one of the first charter schools in the province.

CAPE's population can generally be described as "at risk." Yet, as of November 2017, 88 per cent of our students due to finish high school have graduated within three years and another seven per cent within four years. Past students entered a wide range of professions locally, provincially, nationally and internationally. Some students have been recognized for service to the community, some for excelling academically and some for excelling

in sports, to name only a few. Students have reaped the benefits of the collaborative and distributed decision-making.

This model, a horizontal model of governance, relies on collaboration rather than on top-down adherence to unilaterally imposed structures and rules. Collaboration is anchored in CAPE's bylaws, policies and administrative procedures. The board of directors consists of elected members of the CAPE Society (i.e. parents), at least one elected community member and an appointed or elected school council representative. Everyone has a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities as stated in policy.

Policies are living documents crafted to support the program, those charged with its delivery and ultimately the student. Because policies are regularly reviewed, debated and revised to reflect the emergent needs of our students and research-based best practices, our

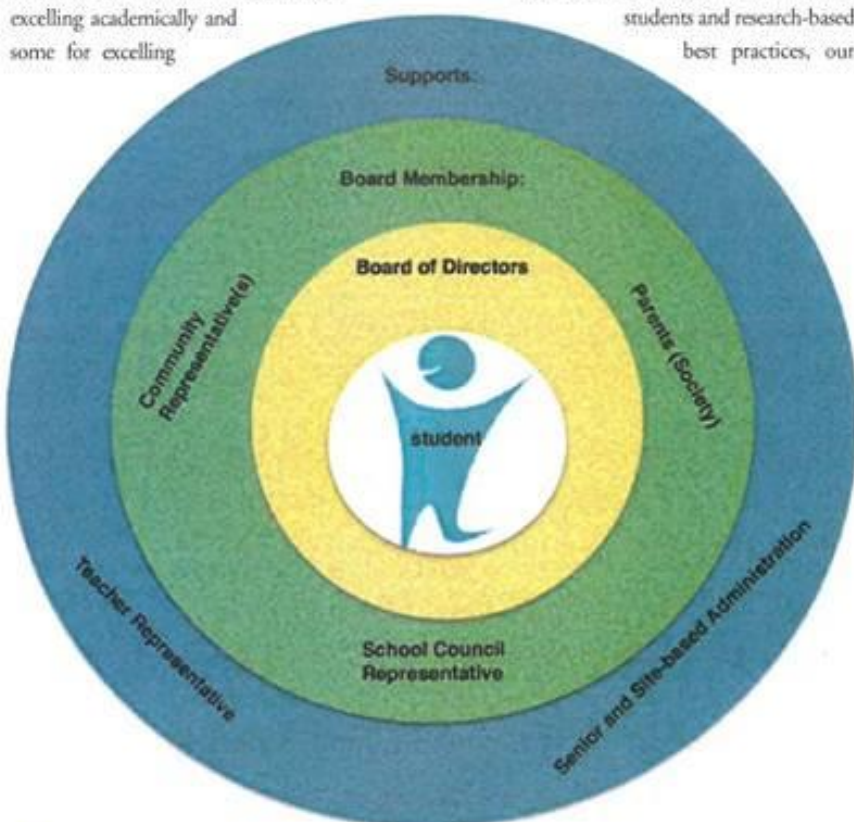
policies address student needs as they evolve. All other levels of responsibility within the school are also grounded in bylaws, policies and administrative procedures.

The board of directors is supported in its decision-making by senior and site administration, as well as a teacher/support staff representative. The student voice is clearly heard as well through surveys, class discussions and the student council. The varied board membership results in open, clear communication among stakeholder groups. Varied view points, divergent areas of expertise and experiences, diverse areas of interest and passions come together and enrich conversations. The common factors are the shared vision and mission; the unwavering focus on the student, on aligning decisions to student needs and interests and on supporting administration and staff.

Respect is what makes collaborative decision-making work; respect for roles and responsibilities, respect for the process of collaborative decision-making, respect for individuals, respect for disparate view points, respect for varied cultural perspectives. Respect is foundational to engagement. Individuals who feel respected and valued are more willing to give their time, efforts, knowledge and skills for the greater good.

Decisions made by engaged board members foster and support an engaged school community. An engaged school community fosters engaged learners. Engaged learners know how they learn and what to learn, complete school, thrive and grow, advocate for themselves and others, and develop into ethical citizens and contributing members of society. These are CAPE's goals.

One of this board's concerns is the early identification of adverse conditions that negatively impact student learning and the development of processes and strategies to address those conditions. The board has established and maintained effective and efficient community partnerships and, as a result, leveraged



local resources to support our learners and their families. These partnerships have fostered parent/community engagement, which, in turn, has provided our students with real world experiences, role models, mentors, opportunities to contribute and be of service to the community, chances to develop social conscience and responsibility, and much more.

Collaboration and distributed responsibility is at the core of each level of decision-making. At the governance level, the finance committee utilizes the skills of its members to review, analyze and investigate financial matters and to then make recommendations to the board of directors.

Knowledgeable representatives from the school parent body and local community and staff comprise the technology committee. They investigate, compare, question and make recommendations to the board on the acquisition, deployment and utilization of technology in our one-on-one computing program and throughout the school.

On site, the administration continues the collaborative and distributed leadership models. Our literacy and numeracy programs

have recently undergone a major review and revision. They are examples of collaborative decision-making at the administrative level. They utilize a three-tier, data-driven response to instruction that relies on the supports of the board, parents and site administration to be responsive and adaptable to student needs.

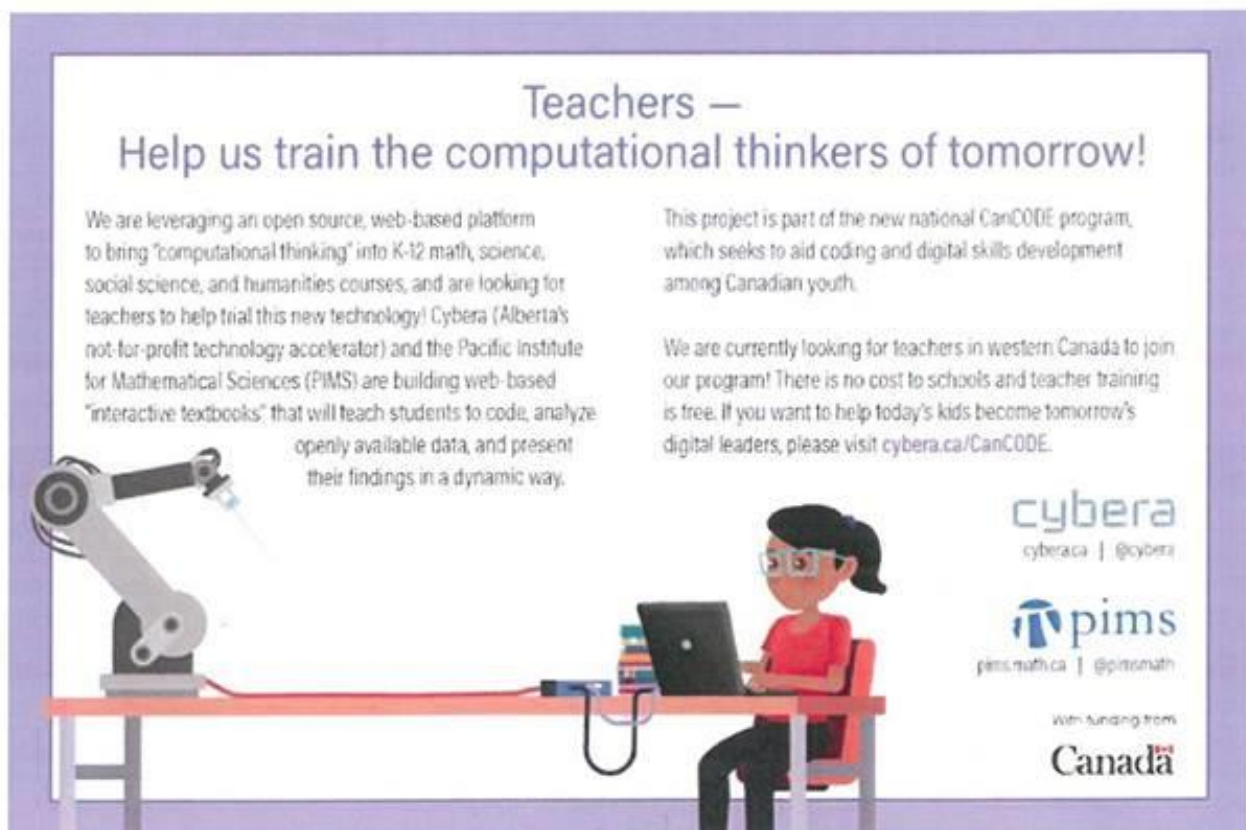
Support for students would not be possible without the input and efforts of our educational assistants, who also contribute information to assist with decision-making. Educational assistants are instrumental in the delivery of our personalized program. The support from educational assistants allows for a greater variety of accommodations and recommendations to be implemented in a timely manner and tracked for effectiveness. As such, their input is sought, valued and integral to the decision-making.

Our personalized program relies on the knowledge and skills of our educational psychologist, principal, vice-principal, teachers, educational assistants, parents, colleagues in other schools and jurisdictions, health professionals, community members and organizations to develop, deliver, monitor, modify

and assess each student's program as defined in the individual program plan.

CAPE's system leaders play a key role in successfully communicating and demonstrating to stakeholders and the community that CAPE is meeting the needs of its students and that the students are successful. These system leaders are ideally positioned to model and sustain the processes that support effective communication and high engagement. Open, clear communication and the maintenance of effective stakeholder engagement can be evidenced within each stakeholder group. It is this engagement that creates a learning environment that supports student engagement, the pursuit of personal best, capacity and citizenship. ■

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Teachers – Help us train the computational thinkers of tomorrow!

We are leveraging an open source, web-based platform to bring “computational thinking” into K-12 math, science, social science, and humanities courses, and are looking for teachers to help trial this new technology! Cybera (Alberta’s not-for-profit technology accelerator) and the Pacific Institute for Mathematical Sciences (PIMS) are building web-based “interactive textbooks” that will teach students to code, analyze openly available data, and present their findings in a dynamic way.

This project is part of the new national CanCODE program, which seeks to aid coding and digital skills development among Canadian youth.

We are currently looking for teachers in western Canada to join our program! There is no cost to schools and teacher training is free. If you want to help today’s kids become tomorrow’s digital leaders, please visit cybera.ca/CanCODE.

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