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A Path to Reconciliation: An Organizational Review of Grande Prairie Regional Catholic School District

Summary of findings and recommendations

November 14, 2018

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Executive summary

Introduction

In June of 2018, the Board of Trustees (Board) of Grande Prairie and District Catholic Schools (District or Organization) retained Dentons Canada LLP (Dentons) to conduct an Organizational Review (Review) of the District.

As part of the Review, Dentons interviewed a total of 45 stakeholders, including current and former District employees, Senior District Administration and leadership, Catholic Education Centre (CEC) staff, parents, Diocesan representatives, provincial District stakeholders and the Board, to get a fulsome view of both the operational and cultural aspects of the Organization. We also received another 17 pieces of written correspondence from various District stakeholders as part of the feedback process.

This document (Report) summarizes our findings, recommendations and plan for implementation.

Project objectives

The key objectives of the Review were as follows:

Objective 1: Assess District climate

We sought to understand the organizational climate of the District, including operations, leadership and culture, by collecting quantitative and qualitative data.

Objective 2: Determine key issues and challenges facing the leadership of the District

After collecting relevant qualitative and quantitative data, we sought to identify a number of issues and challenges facing the District based on the feedback gleaned from our Review.

Objective 3: Provide recommendations to address issues according to level of risk

We have sought to provide at least three recommendations for each key theme derived from our Review, which will allow the Board flexibility in its approach to address each issue as it moves forward.

Methodology

The methodology employed focussed on reviewing relevant operational and cultural aspects of the Organization to inform the recommendations of this Report.

Dentons collected information about the Organization by reviewing relevant District and Board materials, such as Board policies, financials, performance reviews, contracts, the District strategic and advocacy plans, and administrative procedures.

Dentons collected qualitative data through a number of in-person interviews, which took place onsite at the District CEC with District stakeholders from August 27 – 29, 2018, as well as through a series of stakeholder teleconferences. These interviews included individuals who work in various parts of the Organization, including current and former District staff, administration, teachers, parents and Trustees, as well as Diocesan representatives.

Dentons was able to connect directly with a total of 45 stakeholders, and received correspondence from 17 others, who provided feedback that informed this Review.

Dentons does not intend to make findings of fact with respect to particular allegations, or lay blame for any of the perceived challenges facing the District. We identify concerns where information gathered is sufficient to warrant consideration. Our Report offers recommendations to assist the District in mitigating challenges, and find a path forward for all parties to work collaboratively in fulfilling the District's stated Mission of "providing a student-centred, innovative Catholic education for our communities."

Summary of findings and recommendations

The premise upon which Dentons was retained to complete this Review by the Board was a concern that the District may have systemic operational and cultural problems that have grown over time, which may be posing serious challenges to the fulfilment of Catholic education within the District. Of particular concern was the District's leadership, and whether the existing leadership style and structure was fitting to lead the District moving forward. The Review also raised a series of concerns and accusations regarding pivotal leadership and operational matters that were investigated, and our findings form part of the themes identified below.

Dentons identified four themes that are listed below with accompanying recommendations. These themes are explained in more detail throughout the Report.

Theme 1: A culture of control and distrust

Recommendation 1: That the Board and Senior District Administration co-develop a reconciliation plan to address and overcome the distrust and concerns raised throughout this Review.

Recommendation 2: That the Board and Superintendent work to develop a multi-year Superintendent work and leadership plan to increase transparency around administrative planning and Board expectations, and this is to include a more robust and useful yearly Superintendent evaluation process.

Recommendation 3: That the Superintendent empower his staff to fulfil their respective roles without undue interference and oversight, and actively seek ways of boosting staff morale across the District.

Recommendation 4: That the Superintendent and Senior Administration structure the District in such a way as decentralizes control from the Superintendent, and as is consistent with effective business and corporate operations.

Recommendation 5: That the District's Senior Administration initiate a collaborative, District-wide visioning and planning process that includes staff at the District office, school-based administrators and staff, and other employees, to create more transparency and accountability around District planning and budgeting.

Recommendation 6: That the District Senior Administration bolster Administrative Procedure 401 to help explain to trustees, teachers, staff and the District community how transfers are handled and contemplated in the interests of transparency and accountability. This should include a mechanism that provides an opportunity for a staff member potentially being transferred to be consulted on the rationale for a potential move.

Theme 2: A need to refocus on the principles and practices of good governance

Recommendation 1: That the Board and Senior Administration work collaboratively to create an orientation program for newly elected trustees and ongoing, yearly professional development for both Trustees and Senior Administration about the principles of good governance.

Recommendation 2: That the Board invest in mentorship and professional development opportunities specifically focused on the Board Chair and Vice-Chair that includes, but is not limited to, proper meeting governance, procedural training, and collaborating with the Superintendent to ensure proper functioning of the District's leadership.

Recommendation 3: That the Board, as part of its advocacy planning work, develop a stakeholder and community engagement plan to better inform ratepayers and stakeholders of the Board's role, vision, and decisions.

Recommendation 4: That the Board task Senior Administration with developing a District succession plan to better inform the Board of administrative vision and future planning.

Recommendation 5: That Administration provide Board agendas and packages to Board members no less than one week before a Board meeting, to ensure Trustees can adequately prepare for their meetings and request clarification from Administration in advance of meetings if needed.

Theme 3: The challenges and opportunities presented by rapid district growth

Recommendation 1: That a senior administrative position reporting to the Superintendent to oversee construction and facilities management activities be appointed by the District.

Recommendation 2: That the Superintendent work with District office staff to develop portfolio work plans to ensure each staff member is empowered to lead their respective area with appropriate Superintendent and Senior Administration oversight and accountability.

Recommendation 3: That District leadership and school-based leaders collaborate to develop a professional development program for principals and school-based leaders to ensure sustained success, mentorship, and succession planning.

Recommendation 4: That Senior Administration and District leadership ensure staff position profiles, staff allocation, and reporting relationships reflect the needs and priorities of the District currently, and can accommodate future growth projections.

Theme 4: An opportunity to strengthen Catholicity within the district

Recommendation 1: That the District and the Diocese of Grouard-McLennan work collaboratively to develop an engagement plan, where the resources and expertise of each can be leveraged to advance Catholic education in the District.

Recommendation 2: That the Chair of the Board and the Archbishop of Grouard-McLennan hold monthly meetings to ensure an effective line of communication between both parties.

Recommendation 3: That the Board and Administration work collaboratively to develop a Board faith formation professional development program as part of their ongoing governance work.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the District for their cooperation during the Review process as well as all those individuals who participated in the Review.

Looking forward: Ensuring continued district success by returning to student-focused leadership

Successful and complex organizations, such as governments and school districts, understand the risk of being consumed by the often competing demands of different interests and losing sight of what is most important. Grande Prairie and District Catholic Schools Strategic Plan and Priorities are intended to avoid such a situation and provide rigor and focus to its short and long-term decisions and actions. – Grande Prairie and District Catholic Schools Strategic Plan

The findings of our Review and subsequent recommendations are intended to move the District and its leadership forward in a way that can be proactive, student-focused, faith-based, and that can ultimately make relationships and individual leaders stronger. We suggest three essential steps must take place to overcome the issues currently facing the District's leadership, particularly between the Board and Senior Administration:

1. **Take responsibility** – both sides must accept accountability for the respective roles they have played in creating and exacerbating the current situation. The challenges facing the Board's leadership did not commence in June with the announcement of this Review, nor will they be solved by the issuing of our Report. These long-standing concerns at all levels of the District must be heard and learned from if there is to be an opportunity to move forward.
2. **Come together in a common vision** – the entire District is united around a common cause – to provide an excellent Catholic educational experience to the District's students, families, communities, staff, Senior Administration, and Board. We believe all parties must reaffirm their commitment to their Mission and Values, and refocus on their stated strategic priorities.
3. **Reconciliation** – in the spirit of one of Catholicism's most fundamental values, we note that returning rigor and focus to the District's leadership on educational matters will involve the need for both the Board and Senior Administration to reconcile. This is not meant to erase or diminish the importance of what has been found in this Review, but rather, to accept, learn, and come together in the spirit of togetherness to fulfil the roles for which the trustees were elected and for which the Senior Administration was appointed.

Conclusion

This concludes our Review and Report. We hope that our recommendations plan for implementation offer the District the opportunity to address its concerns and provide a stronger vision for Grande Prairie Regional Catholic School Division's leadership in the future.

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Bob holds a series of prestigious fellowships and affiliations including a Senior Fellowship at the Canadian International Council; a Senior Fellowship at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute; Senior Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies; a Research Fellowship at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military, Security and Strategic Studies; and a Research Fellowship at the University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence.

Prior to joining Dentons, Bob held senior-level positions in a Canadian public policy think-tank and in education policy, and served as a faculty member at both the University of Alberta and Brock University. He has published a number of books, volumes, journal articles and opinion editorials on various issues of public policy and politics, and is a frequent media commentator for local, provincial, national and international media.



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Cristina is a regular presenter at seminars and courses, including Dentons' Breakfast for the Mind series, on a variety of current occupational health and safety, employment and labour topics. She is also a member of Dentons' National Diversity and Inclusion Committee.