

Letter to the Editor:

Reclaiming our Village

Tonight was the night of the annual Grade 9 BBQ at our high school. This is a free gathering offered to the families that have a student coming into high school for the first time. This gives them a chance to feel part of the school community, get to know the teachers, and to meet other families and students. The numbers were definitely down from previous years, but a good handful of parents and students did come out. The School's Community Council (which I am part of), traditionally holds their first meeting on this evening. This allows new parents to have the opportunity to sit in on a meeting and see what is planned for the upcoming year, participate in conversation, or ask questions. It seems to be a real task to get even a few parents out to these meetings (5 a year), and this year, we did not have even one. I cannot begin to share the deflation and discouragement that is evident on the face of the school's administration and staff. I cannot express my disappointment and frustration in this obvious show of apathy.

In this time of diminished society, declining health (both physical and mental) of our youth, and broken communication, it upsets me that parents and community members do not make the time to participate in a group that still has the freedom to support this vital, talented, and very often misunderstood population. The saying "it takes a village to raise a child" still holds true. I know that any of you reading this that subscribe to email or Facebook have received one of those "remember when" notes talking about when we were young: we were sent out in the morning to play and expected back at supper; our neighbours could help us or punish us the same as our parents; we knew all of our neighbourhood parents by name; and so on. The majority of our children no longer have this life, this "village", to help them grow. As families, the support systems are different and not woven into the fabric of our society as they once were. Parents are challenged by different responsibilities and different issues. But the bottom line is that our children and youth still need structure, guidance, support and encouragement. It is very common to see many parents, grandparents and family members involved in a child's school success in the elementary system, which seems to pare back gradually through grades 7 and 8, and most times is non-evident come the high school years. Speaking to many parents, often it is felt by the family that they do not have a place in the high school system to be involved. There are many complaints of all of the "scary things" that happen at the high school, and how their children are just "lost" to one thing or another once they start their high school career. It is true, there are many more challenges, the peer pressure is much stronger, and the lure of unhealthy choices is great. But I must ask where is the support for these young people to help guide them, to empower them in who they are, to give them the strength to say no? Ironically, here we are in the midst of legislation putting our teachers under the microscope. These are the front line workers for our youth, for our future community members and leaders. Their responsibilities are far beyond teaching curriculum. By the nature of their chosen vocation, they hold the responsibility of molding our children's character, supporting and encouraging choices, expanding their minds and their being to their fullest potential. This isn't a job, it is a calling. (And in my opinion, this is a position that is taken with as much consideration and responsibility as a minister or pastor.) These chosen people hold our children's lives in their hands –

and have an impact on them and spend time with them for a greater part of their days, and young life. As if this wasn't enough, they are burdened by having to deal with bullying, illegal activities, disruptive and disrespectful behavior, and often hostile, or worse, non-participant families that blame them for the breakdown of a system or the choices that their children are ultimately making through their high school career. Of course this isn't always the case, and each individual and family is different. But I dare say this scenario is more the norm that we generally realize.

In writing this, I am absolutely making some grand generalizations, and I am sweeping over some sensitive issues. My point in this letter is not to address those issues, but to focus on the lack of school community in our high schools from parents, family and neighbouring community members. We cannot throw the whole responsibility on the school system, the administration, and the teachers. As community members, we must also take some responsibility and step up where we can to help support these amazing front line workers (teachers) and support staff (administration) in making this a viable, healthy and strong school community. The School Community Council is one of the very few places that we parents and families have left to join together in a united voice, to work with administration and teachers and student council to better the school's community for our children. It is a place that we can create a strong foundation, a support system, and harbour feelings of empowerment, encouragement, inclusivity, acceptance and bravery. Respectfully and with much appreciation, I recognize the many parents and community members that offer their time and expertise to the students through their volunteer work with extracurricular activities, fundraising, and donations. In the big picture, this is a very small percentage of people, especially compared to the needs of the students, the school and their joint successes. There is much work to be done. There are many collaborative initiatives that are possible, and engagement from all groups of people involved directly and indirectly with the school is important and vital to the strength of the school community. Your time is valuable, yes. But the foundational support that we can provide our future generations is vital, essential, and the very essence of their successes. Please consider being part of the school community. We need more parents and families to stand together in a united voice; to be proactive and fearless in the face of indifference. We too, can once again, be a village.