

February 6th SCC mini-conference speaking notes

Thankyou.

I appreciate being able to come and speak with you today.

I am chair of the Dr. Perry SCC (school community council). This is my second year as a member of our SCC.

My daughter, Annika, is in the first grade this year. My son Joshua will be starting kindergarten this coming fall.

The province-wide movement from Parent Teacher Associations to SCCs came with some pretty audacious objectives. SCCs are envisioned to be at the centre of the community and to drive a lot of value and services. There's a lot of responsibility to shoulder being on one of these councils. We really are in a pretty influential position to do things not only for our school, but for our neighbours as well. I want to congratulate you and thank you for making this commitment and putting in effort for a greater good.

I'd like to establish a couple ground rules for my presentation. First, ask me questions anytime you want. This becomes a lot more interesting if it's a conversation. Please, fire away. Second, please don't take notes. Everything I'm saying and everything I'm showing is available for download on my website, which I'll share at the end.

I hope to save lots of time at the end for more questions and discussion, too.

I've been invited to speak to you because the Perry SCC is taking some steps you might find interesting. Before we get to that though, I want to tell you a little bit about myself.

I'm passionate about improving the quality of life in my community. I believe we've lost our sense of relationship at the local level. There's too much of an "every person for themselves" kind of vibe to the world. I'd like to help change that. I don't think all the advances and technical innovations happening in the world have to come at the expense of knowing your neighbour.

This is easier said than done, though. I'm just one person and the trend towards anonymity is obvious.

Nevertheless, I want to help people and make a difference in my community.

Here's the real problem, though. I'm not very good at the traditional things that would help people, like baking cookies, compassionate hugs or chaperoning a school dance. I'm trying to play to my strengths, which are things like strategic planning, conceptual diagrams and theoretical models.

So while I want to help people, I've realized what I really need to do is help people help other people.

I think this actually works out do be pretty helpful. When I'm working with SCCs or other public-serving organizations, it's pretty clear that there's a need for some assistance at the organizational level. This also allows me to maximize my reach. If I can help a community group get better that serves 300 people, I feel like I'm doing some pretty positive stuff.

This is all to say that the thoughts and ideas I share with you today come from an intention to make the world a better place. I worry sometimes I sound a bit too objective and unfeeling, but perhaps that's just me trying to help get results in my own way.

I've got a fairly practical objective here today. Very specifically, I want to help you see how important it is to step back and evaluate why you're doing what you're doing. I want you to examine WHY your SCC exists.

This is the same exercise the Perry SCC has gone through. Our council isn't done. We're still figuring it out and growing our capacity, but I think we're on the right track. As a starting point for a discussion about building focus in an SCC, I want to share my take on what SCCs typically are like right now.

They're often stressful situations. There's too much to do and there's not enough time or people to do it. There are lots of expectations, needs and challenges. Quite often, things don't get dealt with until they're an emergency. There's not much planning involved. It's pretty reactive.

Your own experience went something like this. Your kid started school. You thoughtfully determined that the quality of your child's education and the formative years of grade school were important enough for you to get engaged. You showed up for that first meeting full of vim and vigour, eyes aglow with possibilities for the things you could do for the school... and they said, "Thank goodness you're here. Jim just quit the fundraising committee and we need a new chair."

You didn't say no. You couldn't say no. These people were pouring their hearts and souls into serving the school and you couldn't bear to see them suffer. 1, 3, 8 years later, and now you're completely invested in the projects you didn't care about when you started.

I'd like to make a broad, general distinction between two different roles that come up in SCCs. There are individuals who are focused on Program Delivery and there are individuals that focus on Solution Development.

Both of these roles are necessary to make an SCC work, to make any non-profit work. If you have just one or just the other, you're going to be out of balance. If you have all people that are focusing on Developing Solutions for the future, you have a lot of theory and ideas and no-one to do the work. If you have all people that are focusing on Delivering Programs, you have a bunch of people doing hard work, but we don't know if it's actually the right or best thing for the school.

My experience with SCCs is that they tend to err on the side of Program Delivery. Most people feel most comfortable if they've got a job and they're working hard to get it done. Asking whether it's the right job at the right time for the right people falls to the wayside.

When this is the predominant practice in an SCC, we often forget to ask why we are here. We get laden with tasks and responsibilities and don't make time to ask if we're pursuing the right goal. This is an activity trap. We get caught comforting ourselves that we're creating value while we may just be making a flurry of activity. In short, the environment changes, but we sometimes don't.

When I've spoken with SCC members, I see some recurring themes that happen. When we just keep doing, and we don't ask why, that's when we get in trouble. When we're not asking WHY, here's what happens:
We get too narrow in our focus and just do a few things for the school.

The SCC becomes a pretty small group that works hard but also burns out. The SCC makes lots of assumptions about roles and responsibilities. We decide we're supposed to do X and not Y, but we don't really consider what's needed or correct. There can also be a lot of back-seat driving and micro-management. Even if it's not their responsibility, members start focusing and digging on some pretty narrow details of programs.

I want to stress a key point here. It's not that this stuff isn't important. It is important. There's lots of other things that are important, too. The opportunity is for you and your SCC to decide, of all the important things, which one or ones should be our priority?

The Dr. Perry SCC went through an exercise to examine what our purpose is in meeting every month. Asking and answering WHY was powerful. Let me tell you how we did it.

First, we acknowledge that we weren't working to a plan. We were just doing stuff.

Second, we deliberately made space to ask ourselves a "Why are we here?" type question.

I used a facilitation method that worked really well for this, and I want to come do it for your school. We'll talk more about that in a bit.

Third, we have been working hard to make sure we don't fall back into habits of just "doing." We're keeping the plan alive.

Here's what we came up with:

- 1 Enabling Parental Involvement
- 2 Sharing Spirit through Partnership
- 3 Acknowledging Student's Value and Worth
- 4 Diversifying the Learning Experience
- 5 Growing Citizenship

I won't get into too much detail about what each of these means to us. If you want descriptions, again, I've got them up on my website at nevindanielson.com. The point I'm trying to make here is that the exercise of stepping back and determining our purpose was essential and gave us real energy.

I will say, though, if you go through an exercise like this, it's pretty easy to fall into the trap of defining yourself by your past practices. I'd encourage you to shake those conventions and ask yourself anew, "Why are we here?"

Here's some assumptions you may have to get past:

- We're here to raise money and buy stuff
- We're here to make sure parents have a voice at school
- This one's related, but it deserves it's own statement: Our job is to assess school policy
- If it weren't for us exceptional people, no parents would be involved
- We're great at delegating

I can simplify the process we went through for your SCC to get on the right track:
one, take an hour to have a conversation about "Why are we here?"
two, commit to the results and change what you're working on

I want to see your SCC get stronger. If it's of any help, please invite me in to do the same facilitated session we did at our SCC. I would discuss the key focus question that we're going to answer. It might be as simple as "Why are we here?", then we would go through an exercise to answer it. It's called a Group Concensus Workshop.

As I said, today's presentation is available for download from my website, nevindanielson.com. I've got contact info there if you want to find me. I've also got a link to an online forum I created for SCCRegina. To respect everyone's privacy, it's by invitation only. It's a place for you to raise concerns and interests with fellow SCC members from across the city. Come find me at my website and ask me for an invitation. Everyone here is eligible to be a member.

Thanks very much.