

Good News: Parents group help Calgary schools in need

Education charity joins initiative for its citywide reach

BY SARAH MCGINNIS, CALGARY HERALD JANUARY 19, 2009



Chair of the Briar Hill parent council, Lisa Mueller (left) stands with parent council treasurer Kathleen Staniland outside of Briar Hill Elementary school in NW Calgary with their respective children (left to right) Will de Paiva, Ben Pavan, Sara Pavan, three year old Karis de Paiva and Shaye de Paiva.

Photograph by: Adrian Shellard, Calgary Herald

Determined to give their kids the best education possible, parents at a northwest elementary school began an aggressive fundraising campaign.

But after a few years the library shelves at Briar Hill School were stacked with new books, high-tech SMART boards hung in every classroom and computers abounded at the school.

It grew increasingly difficult for parents to find worthy projects on which to spend the thousands of dollars generated by volunteering at casino nights.

"We found ourselves with, in my opinion, almost an embarrassment of riches," said Briar Hill School parent council chair and mother of five Lisa Mueller.

Over the past year, the parent council has been working with the Calgary-based education charity EducationMatters to launch the Schools Helping Schools Fund.

The new project will help ensure Calgary schools that find fundraising a challenge can access grants for some of the same educational enhancements offered in other communities.

Parents at Briar Hill School had mused about giving some of their fundraising dollars to another school before, but struggled with the logistics.

How would they decide which schools really needed the money? How would the donations be

distributed and who would monitor how it was used?

The solution came at a Calgary Association of Parents and School Councils meeting where one Briar Hill parent first learned of the local education charity EducationMatters, said Mueller.

Almost immediately, the Briar Hill School parent council decided partnering with EducationMatters could be the best way to share some of their fundraising good fortune.

"The process all fell into place. It was a good idea and we could get other schools involved. Something like EducationMatters has a handle on who needs the help," said Kathleen Staniland, mother of two and Briar Hill Elementary parent council treasurer.

The parents launched the specialized fund with EducationMatters with an initial \$6,200 donation.

They've also pledged to contribute a portion of future casino fundraising profits.

Half of the money in the fund will go toward grants for school enhancement projects while the rest will remain in an endowment.

"It's really revolutionary," said EducationMatters spokeswoman Donna Rapp.

Though the charity has been raising money for education projects in Calgary for several years, it had never thought about working with parent fundraising groups before.

At least one more school has already expressed interest in contributing to the Schools Helping Schools fund, said Rapp.

"So many schools in this city are dealing with challenged populations and don't have the resources for fundraising. . . . If we can help someone in our own back-yard at another school, wouldn't that be great," she said.

Mueller is thrilled by the possibility of schools stepping in to help each other provide the best educational opportunities for all Calgary children.

"What better example can there be for our kids," Mueller said.

smcginnis@theherald.canwest.com