Major School Change

For

2010 – 2011

Response Cover Sheet

Orchard Elementary School

Name of responding School/Centre or Individual

Name of Consultative Group

Signature

Title

☐ I/We would like to be heard at the Public Hearings in November 2009
☐ I/We do not wish to be heard at the Public Hearings in November 2009
Orchard is peaceful
And no student is doubtful.
We work so well together
Like Martin and Rosa did.
We love Black History month
Like we love Christmas
And we don’t only celebrate
Black History one month
We celebrate it every month.
We also go to other schools
To teach them what black history means.
We have the best students
In LaSalle like we have
The best teachers in LaSalle
Our gym teacher, Miss D’Adamo
Takes us to all kinds of tournaments.
Our music teacher, Miss Dara,
Made the best choir in Montreal.
That’s Orchard School

Jarryd T.
Grade 5
2008-2009
Introduction

The governing board of Orchard Elementary respectfully submits this brief on behalf of our community in response to questions in the MAJOR SCHOOL CHANGE process regarding the rationalization of the elementary school network.

Orchard Elementary School has many goals, but a single mission. Every decision we make, every plan we put in place, every meeting we hold, has one purpose in mind. We strive to create a school that acts as a social equalizer, that creates for our inner city students, a safe haven of learning, love and support to balance the inequities that characterize their lives outside of school.

A recent (2009) demographic study contracted by the city of Lasalle and carried out by Convencité Inc. as part of the revitalization process for the Airlie Bayne area, where many of our students live, revealed some disturbing statistics which we would like to bring to your attention. 52% of the residents in this area live below the poverty line. Despite relatively high levels of maternal education, 31% are unemployed. 50% do not have a car. Of all crimes reported in the area 31% have a component of violence. Substance abuse, domestic violence, and a daily struggle to survive typify the lives of many of our students.

Our school population may be small but our challenges are greater than many faced in much larger, much more affluent schools. In a sad contradiction, the children of privilege find themselves in schools overflowing with state of the art technology, the latest in teaching tools, and even the plumpest of surroundings. Our school shares the struggle to "make ends meet" that our families endure, because surpluses are not sown in schools where the seeds of poverty are planted. Despite these fiscal challenges, a dedicated home and school partnership ceaselessly searches for the funds to level the playing field for our students, and huge gains have been met in the past few years to upgrade technology, improve resources and create a school that mirrors to the students their value to the community.

The biggest offering that Orchard staff, volunteers and community offer to the children of our school is not a tangible one, and could never be measured on any school board’s bottom line. Close to 200 children come to school every day and when they arrive, they are known. Budgeting gurus, major school change committees, and number crunchers need to understand the immeasurable value of being taught, loved, and supported in a small, caring environment where all physical, emotional and educational needs can be addressed. Children of poverty not only need the type of support network provided by a small school, they deserve it.
What is Orchard Elementary?

Orchard Elementary is truly a community school in every sense of the word. It is a school that welcomes every student from our community who wishes to attend. All students are not only welcomed to the school but become a genuine part of our extended school family. The focus of our community of educators is to make sure that the potential of each student is unlocked and any obstacles to progress are addressed. We know many of our parents face huge challenges on a daily basis and we try to support our families in any way we can. Orchard students truly become ‘our’ kids. This relationship is possible only because of the genuine caring exhibited by our staff, volunteers and community supporters. From the secretary to the teachers to the caretaker, every single staff member is committed to the children’s success.

Any discussion of what a school is, should begin with the educational project. Orchard Elementary’s stated goals are:

To fully prepare students for citizenship in a multicultural, technologically advanced and rapidly changing 21st century society:

- By ensuring all students develop strong literacy and numeracy skills to form the basis of a solid foundation for lifelong learning;
By creating an environment of mutual respect, kindness and safety, where students learn to interact and express their needs in a positive and pro-active fashion;

By providing students with needed opportunities for personal development and educational growth through increased exposure to extracurricular activities and experiential learning that might otherwise be denied to them because of their socioeconomic circumstances;

By developing technological fluency in our students so that they develop skills which will serve them well in the pursuit of higher education and in a highly competitive workplace;

By fostering pride in our students – pride in themselves, their heritage and in their school as an institution and as a unique culture.

Orchard is an early immersion school that focuses on preparing our students to meet the world, competent in Canada’s two official languages. We are committed to preparing students to take their place proudly in Quebec society. Our program focuses on immersing our students in a French milieu, not only in the classroom but in the larger society. Our emphasis on experiential education provides the students with real life experiences that solidify their understanding of how a second language will enhance their lives, as well as building their skill in that language. Our introduction to French culture runs the gamut of activities animated in French. Thanks to our status as a small school, we are able to organize full school outings, which, last year, included:

- Visit and tour of a Quebecois apple and pumpkin farm.
- Cabane a sucre
- Fort Agrignon
- Parc Safari

All of these outings included activities such as story telling, puppet shows, tours, movies, songs, etc, in French. Students are thus given the chance to utilize their French skills in a real-life setting, and full school field trips reinforce the sense of family and community that characterizes Orchard. In all these instances our students proved themselves able to understand and communicate in their second language.
apple picking field trip

return from fieldtrip – apples in hand

Fort Angignon challenges
Literacy for all is our raison d'etre. The entire Orchard staff focuses on a collaborative and shared approach to the teaching of reading and writing across the two languages. We know good literacy skills are the tool that will enable our disadvantaged students, who in many cases come from backgrounds of poverty, trauma, neglect and/or abuse, to achieve lifelong learning and success. Our commitment to literacy can also be seen in our

- ongoing in school workshops in literacy best practices for all teaching staff
- Two fulltime resource teachers
- One on one literacy support for struggling readers
- Reading buddies program

- Indigo Love of Reading grant of $62,000 to expand our school and classroom libraries
- Prizewinning school-wide literacy events

Our school is very multicultural. From our preschool onwards, students learn that difference is the norm. This learning is supported by active peace education through all cycles. At cycle three students also have the opportunity to train in the art of mediation and become peer mediators. We also celebrate our difference. An intercultural focus is part of the ongoing curriculum. Each year, a month-long unit of inquiry on Black History culminates in an Open House and community festival, which we believe is unique to the LBPSB, celebrating Black culture and highlighting the abilities and talents of our students which draws all of our families into the school. This is just one aspect of our multi-faceted cultural approach to education. Traditions of many cultures are explored in the classrooms and through special events.

Our Black History month program of activities provides another opportunity to bring engaging second language experiences into our school. Each year February becomes a month of extraordinary possibilities.
This past year the student workshops sponsored by the Culture in the Schools program included:

- ateliers in mask making
- African percussion
- hip hop dance and self esteem workshops
- Black Theatre Workshop performances (sponsored by Orchard but open to all LaSalle schools)

Prominent members of the community and respected entertainers are invited to participate in the annual Black History concert. Previous years’ talent has included Lorraine Klaassen, world music performer, Ranee Lee, noted jazz vocalist, and Justin Jackson, a rising star in tapdancing, as well as local talent from the Lasalle area.
We also provide a wide variety of extra curricular events to enhance our students’ lives. Dance, music, choir, guitar lessons, sports, yoga, and an art program with an art therapist are offered to the students at Orchard. Thanks to volunteers and support from organizations such as Home & School, St. Lawrence Optimists, these activities are offered at very reduced or no cost and so are accessible to all students.

Sports are another realm where we strive to provide activities geared for all. Regular participation in intramural, school field days, and almost every single school board tournament are an exciting part of our school year.

In each case students are genuinely engaged in an experience that is relevant and exciting to them. The fact it is often happening in French often does not even register as they work to learn a new dance step or pick up the rhythm on the djembe. Experiential education combines with second-language instruction to create a complete learning experience.
We believe that the best way to describe Orchard Elementary School is to create a document that alternates between the more formal language of a school profile and short features that focus on the elements that make our school all that it is.

“I chose this school for my children because it is a small. I myself attended elementary and high school and found it to be like a family...”

Alana Dickson, Orchard Mom of 4

Orchard is a school that cares about the kids in every way. That is why we (my husband and I) chose "Orchard" for Haley and why I try my best to do what I can for the school. - from Veronica Bishop, Orchard Mom

“Being a completely new teacher can be scary. I feel as if I’ve been at Orchard for years. Each and every teacher and support staff has made me feel so welcome! Almost everyone has offered a hand to show me the way and provide advice. I feel as if I would not feel the same way if I had taken another post at a larger, more affluent school.” - Evan McCurdy, Phys. Ed. teacher.

“In a world becoming more impersonal, Orchard Elementary School remains anything but. In our cities “mega” seems to be an operative word. We build massive stores that stock everything except personnel who are available to help you and be nice to you. I do not want my students to be placed in a big school, only to be lost in the crowd to fend for themselves. “Mega” might be more economically viable, but it comes with a price. At Orchard Elementary School each child is looked after by each staff member. Older students watch over younger ones. Orchard is small enough that this can happen. Bigger schools lose the personal, the sense of belonging, safety and family. At Orchard School we actually know each other. Our kids love coming to school everyday. That is one of the MANY reasons I love this school.” – Dara Weiss, Music teacher.
The two following incidents are but two of many but go a long way to explaining who we are.

- All schools, rich or poor, deal with the issue of head lice. This fall one of our family developed lice. This family was already overwhelmed and the school was concerned as to whether the custodial parent could cope with this added burden. One of our integration aides spent hours of her time, including her breaks, combing the hair of these three children to make sure that all nits and lice were gone. As anyone who has had to deal with this problem knows, this is not a particularly pleasant task but it did so much for this family. It removed the burden from the parent, ensured the task was done properly and reassured the children how much we cared about them.

- A second example of staff commitment involves a family of 6 children who were having trouble getting to school in appropriate clothing. Either clothes did not meet dress code or were dirty. Donations of appropriate clothes by our Home & School didn’t help as the parent seemed to have trouble keeping ahead of the laundry. At a certain point in the school year, two integration aides took on the task of providing clean donated t-shirts at the beginning of each day, collecting them at the end of the day and washing them at home and returning them to the school. This provided a great solution to the problem.

Not every school can offer this sort of caring to its students and not every school needs to. However, many of the students in our population benefit enormously from this sort of hands-on support. There is no way that the needs of these students and their families could be met in a larger, more indifferent school. At the heart of Orchard, every student has access to a meaningful adult-student relationship and a safe and welcoming environment.

As a school we are constantly trying to find new ways to provide our students with the tools they will need in their future. One exciting innovation we implemented last year and intend to expand is our partnership with Ecole Pierre Remy of the Commission Scolaire Marguerite Bourgeoys. We share a building with this school and in the past year we shared much more. In the course of the year we hosted:

- presentations by the French students,
- participated in joint community service projects,
- were involved in a series of sports tournaments for students and staff,
- a joint field day where students were partnered with a Pierre Remy class and rotated through stations run by staff members and parent volunteers from both schools. This project was enormously successful and we look forward to expanding it this year. Our Home & School was out in force so parents, as well as students, had a chance to build community with our neighbours.
Supporting our families by providing for their needs is part of the Orchard culture. We reach out in a variety of ways:

- A school wide breakfast program (so no children are singled out) as well as free hot soup program in winter;
- Making sure all students have needed school supplies
- A Christmas basket campaign that links us with Forest Hill Junior and meets the needs of many of our families at a time of year that can be stressful.
- Inviting speakers who can provide insight for parents on best practices

We hope to increase our support in the future by

- Providing support for parents re literacy development strategies
- Offering evening French and computer courses to help our parents
- Opening the library to parents after school and providing a section in the library for parenting books

While all these things are important, what makes our school unique is the commitment made by staff and families. Orchard is also a community of educators who support each other and work and learn together to make sure each of our students meet their potential. It is a community where all have a voice, where support staff and teachers are truly a team. It is a school where teachers make remarkable compromises to ensure our students have every opportunity.

As well, Orchard is a community of parents and families that work hard to help the students and the school in any way they can. Although the governing board and Home & School are small in numbers what they accomplish for our students is miraculous. Graduation exercises, field trips, special school events, staff appreciation, - parent volunteers leave their mark on all of these school activities and find the will and the means to make school life better for all students.
Ongoing support of

- St. Lawrence Optimists
- Indigo Love of Reading Foundation
- Culture in the Schools program
- CBC school needs project
- Professional Development and Innovation grants
- MNA grants
- Pearson Educational Foundation
- Kino Quebec
- Private sector grant of $10,000
- Entrepreneurship grants
- Other Teacher generated grants of over $4,000

Now we need your support to do what we do best! One of our biggest challenges is coping with the instability, bred by fear that “the board is going to close us”. As our governing board chair Ron Taylor recently pointed out, in the 10 years his children have been attending our school there have been three major school changes. “I have committed to Orchard. I wish the board would commit to us as parents and guarantee that our children could have some continuity in their school life. Commit to us so we can commit to the future of our students.”
There are no absolute metre sticks to measure success but the fact that 95% of our students go on to LBPSB high schools is one reflection of the satisfaction our families feel with our school.

Finally, no discussion of the future of schools in Lasalle can be complete without at least acknowledging ‘the elephant in the room’. Having one school that accepts only a certain profile of student necessarily means that all other schools have a higher level of students with challenges. Lasalle schools have become more unbalanced due to the presence of a program that accepts only students who are academically strong and whose families are financially able. In our environment in Lasalle we feel there is a real need for a small school where staff know the challenges of each student and their family. At least one in five Orchard students face learning and/or behaviour challenges. We believe our small school with its caring, committed educators is in the best position to support all students.

Our community believes in us!

- Teachers return to uncertain positions because of commitment to students
- Parents continue to trust us to educate their children. Our class sizes are actually getting larger. The number of kindergarten students enrolled at Orchard has increased by 25% since 2008-2009.
- We have developed a very positive partnership with CCS, an Anglophone community service organization, and are developing projects to support young mothers in the community and also a visual arts program to encourage artistic talent in our students.
- We are ecstatic to have been chosen this year to receive the support of the Ecole Montrealaise/Supporting Montreal Schools program. The incredible windfall of $25,000 will be a tremendous resource to help us enrich the lives of our students.
Lucy the dove of peace and Lucky the lion of courage –

Orchard’s mascots