

Educational town hall a big hit

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LETHBRIDGE HERALD

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More than 200 people turned out Monday evening for the chance to voice their opinions at an education town hall meeting.

The Lethbridge public school division hosted the third annual meeting, intended to provide students, parents, staff and community members a forum to help local school trustees determine short- and long-term priorities for local public education.

"I'm just overwhelmed by the response," said Supt. Barry Litun, noting attendance at the annual town hall meetings has grown each year since they were introduced.

About 210 took part in Monday's session at Allan Watson School, up from 190 last year and 170 the year before that.

Opinions varied when The Herald asked several on hand what key improvement was most needed or which program most needed to be preserved.

A pair of Grade 10 Allan Watson students said they were staunchly opposed to the school division's plan to amalgamate their school with Outreach High School.

"I don't like it, and none of the students I know like it either," said Ashton Morelli. "It's perfect the way it is. I don't see why they want to change it."

Taylor Day said she feared Allan Watson's family atmosphere would be lost if the two schools combine.

The new combined school is to be renamed Victoria Park High School.

Meanwhile, Claudia Van Toor, a parent who works as an educational assistant, said she would like to see more support provided for students with learning problems.

Although there's adequate help for children with behavioral problems, she said, support is lacking for children who have trouble learning.

Other suggestions from parents included making more programs available for gifted and talented students, and adding more physical activities for all students outside of organized sports.

During the initial phase of the session, participants divided into small groups of five or six to discuss ideas and help reach consensus on the most important issues. Participants then used electronic response devices to rank suggestions in their preferred order of priority.

Litun said the ideas distilled from the meeting will form an important element when trustees and administration hold their two-day planning session to map out the district's education plan.

"This is a great opportunity for us to listen to our community and find out what they value," he said. "What we're doing is really hearing the voice of our community."

Understanding the priorities of local parents and students is very important, he said, especially with Alberta school districts facing budget constraints for at least the next couple of years.

"The difficulty is that nothing we do is really unimportant."

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