



In Profile: Ester Zdebiak

Ester Zdebiak is a passionate advocate for parent engagement in their children's education and the 2019 winner of the George Matthews Award for Excellence in Parent Leadership from the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC). Learn spoke with her about the important role parents play in the education system.

When did you first get involved in your children's schools?

I have three children and my youngest, just graduated this June. My involvement in my children's education began when my second daughter was three days old and my husband pointed out that there was a nursery school at our community centre that our first child could go to. I stopped by and they asked me to take a position at the school. It must have been the post-birth hormones that led me to say yes! But I'm glad I did. I learned a lot and stayed actively involved from then on, taking a very hands-on role in everything I've done and serving on Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) at each of my children's schools.

When we moved to the Kootenays eight years ago, I continued my involvement at the PAC and district PAC levels. Wherever I was needed, I stepped in. I think I've held all the official PAC positions, except for secretary because I can't take notes!

As a parent, you learn so much by getting involved. You learn what's going on in classrooms, the school, the district and even at a provincial level. You also have the opportunity to build incredible friendships and to meet mentors and mentor others.



Why are PACs important?

PACs play a vital role in giving parents a voice as education partners. That parental voice is crucial. Parents know their children, what they need and how they succeed. It's important that parents are part of the decision-making process when it comes to their child's education and that parents are invited to education partnership tables to be advocates for their children.

It's been rewarding to see that parent advocacy can make such a difference. I was fortunate to attend the BCCPAC Annual General Meeting where the Minister of Education, Rob Fleming, announced that PACs would no longer be responsible for raising money to replace older playgrounds (see [Funding provides thousands of students with new school playgrounds](#) for details). Many PACs had long advocated that all that energy on fundraisers and bake sales for new playground equipment shouldn't be parents' responsibility. It was nice to see that those advocacy efforts paid off.

How else have you been involved?

I've also sat on a policy committee at the school district level. The Kootenay Lake School District is revising some of its policies, and I think it's very valuable for parents to be at the table to share their perspectives on everything from vaping and LGBTQ awareness to spraying park fields with pesticides.

How do you encourage parents to see themselves as education partners?

I think many parents still have that old school mentality that if they're sitting in the principal's office it means they're in trouble! I wish more parents would come in and experience what their children's schools are all about and then get involved.

With that in mind, our PAC recently invited parents of children in the feeder schools to visit the local secondary school. It's common to invite the Grade 6s in to check out the "big school" and it's equally important to invite their parents. This can help address their preconceptions of what high school is all about and hopefully open the door to them participating in the education system.



Do you have any messages you'd like to share with educators?

Parents want to be involved in their kids' schools, but they're often not sure how they can help. I encourage teachers and administrators to think about how they can engage with parents. Be specific about what you need – whether it's helping with fundraising, serving breakfast, cleaning up after events, sitting on committees, whatever. My experience is that people are more than happy to say “yes, I can do that” when they are asked to help in specific ways. Opening the door to that involvement is key.



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