

What We Heard James Mowat Elementary

Phase 1

ystation

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Produced for EIPS



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Executive Summary

James Mowat Elementary is the designated receiving school for the Westpark neighbourhood in the City of Fort Saskatchewan. Enrolment projections for James Mowat Elementary indicate the school will be at capacity for the 2022-23 school year despite the addition of one modular classroom. Elk Island Public Schools (EIPS) must determine the best way to accommodate students in the James Mowat Elementary enrolment area and in elementary schools within Fort Saskatchewan. There are many possible solutions under consideration and as such EIPS wished to share information with and gather feedback from families to inform recommendations for the Board of Trustees' consideration as they decide how best to move forward.

Engagement with the James Mowat Elementary community is planned in two phases. The spring engagement, covered by this report, presented the issue to the community and collected their reactions and potential solutions. The fall engagement will present these findings back to the community along with options for consideration that would address the issue.

The spring engagement consisted of two in-person facilitated open house discussions and an online survey. In total, 25 people attended the two sessions held on June 14 from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. and June 16 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. in the James Mowat Elementary gymnasium. The online survey was open from June 14 to 28 and a total of 103 survey responses were collected.

The key questions the engagement sought to answer were:

1. What are your initial concerns? For your family? For the school? For the community?
2. What will be important for EIPS to think about as it explores different processes or options in relation to enrolment pressures for elementary students?
3. What do you think are potential solutions to this issue?

During the open houses, three central themes emerged:

- Concerns about the impact on children both academically and socially.
- The importance of community.
- The importance of communication.

Open house attendees' priorities and solutions focused on:

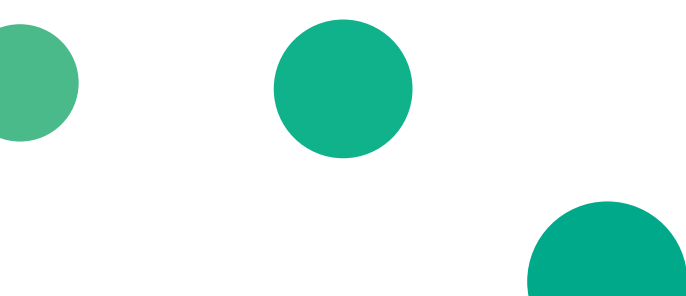
- adding more classrooms (portables, outdoor classrooms, or underutilized spaces elsewhere in the city),
- a new school,
- moving older grades to junior high sooner,
- making other schools more attractive and
- keeping friends and siblings together.

Some attendees noted feeling like they did not have enough information on the problem to offer solutions and others noted that their initial reaction was that since their children were already attending the school any changes to enrolment would not impact their children.

While survey respondents had similar concerns, priorities and solutions as the open house attendees, they also expressed more diverse responses. Four central themes emerged from the survey responses:

- Concerns about separating friends and siblings and those students already attending should be prioritized for staying at the school.
- A new school needs to be built.
- Concerns over education standards slipping.
- Concerns that classes are or will become too large.

Survey respondents also had several additional suggestions/solution themes that emerged:

- hire more teachers or staff,
 - add more portables,
 - rezone or change the boundaries of the school,
 - the government needs to fund education better and
 - there needs to be better planning.
- 

Methods

The purpose of this engagement was to inform the James Mowat Elementary community of the enrolment issue and to begin to consult with them about potential solutions. To achieve this purpose, two key public engagement methods were deployed to gather insights from the James Mowat Elementary community: facilitated open houses and an online survey. Both methods have a proven track record for providing diverse input opportunities and gathering nuanced responses.

The success of these methods relies on a solid engagement communication plan. To ensure all school community members had an opportunity to participate in the engagement, a letter was electronically delivered to all school families one week in advance stating the date and time of the open houses and notifying them of the opportunity to participate via survey. A-frame signs were placed near the front of the school six days prior to the event and an advertising spot ran on local radio station MIX 107.9 seven times a day.

The open houses were scheduled to start at two different times, the Tuesday session at 5:30 p.m. and the Thursday session at 6:30 p.m. to give attendees options to choose from for their family's schedule. Childcare was offered at both sessions to ensure parents with younger children felt welcome to fully participate and were not burdened with sourcing childcare. Childcare was accessed by attendees for both sessions. Refreshments were also provided. A slide presentation was used so attendees had a visual reference for the conversation and the gymnasium was set up in an arched theatre-style seating so the facilitator could easily see all participants.

During the open houses, an overview of the issue was provided by EIPS leadership, and the facilitated session sought to answer these questions:

1. What are your initial thoughts or opinions?
2. What are your initial concerns? For your family? For the school? For the community?
3. What will be important for EIPS to think about as it explores different processes or options in relation to this issue?
4. What do you think are potential solutions to this issue?
5. If you could give EIPS one piece of advice on this issue, what would it be?
6. Is there anything we have missed? Any additional comments?

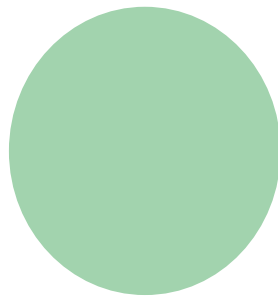
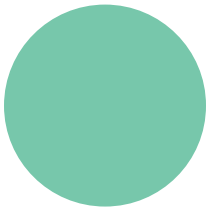
The survey opened on the same day as the first open house. The survey preamble gave participants an overview of the issue that paralleled what was presented in the open house, then asked the open-ended questions from the open house and closed by asking a few questions about the number of children a respondent has at James Mowat Elementary or in EIPS, along with their postal code.

One additional feedback mechanism was available but not utilized. A call-in phone line was included in the letter to families and on the survey but was not accessed in this phase by any respondents.

Results

Themes from the open house mirror themes that emerged in the survey. Overall, the conversations in the open house were respectful, only gentle reminders were needed in the second session about side conversations. There was no major disagreement among the attendees. There were participants in both the open houses and survey who acknowledged the difficult decision that EIPS must make.

“I would just like to state that I understand this is a difficult situation the school is in and not as simple as it may seem. That being said, I still believe keeping current students attending James Mowat is the priority and of the utmost importance to our children and community moving forward. Any and all options should be exhausted before resorting to a lottery or anything else along those lines.”



Open House

Overall, 25 people attended the open houses (seven attended the Tuesday session and 18 attended the Thursday session). The Tuesday session lasted approximately one hour and 45 minutes and the Thursday session lasted two hours. While the questions were designed to encourage participants to reflect and respond to different aspects of the enrolment issue, a few key themes repeatedly surfaced throughout the conversation: impact on children academically and socially, the importance of community and communication.

Initial reaction and concerns

Similar thoughts and concerns were raised in response to the first two questions and these themes continued to echo throughout the entire conversation. Many attendees were concerned about the impact any decision would have on students, both academically and socially. A major concern raised was the potential for increased classroom sizes and the ensuing impact on academic outcomes for children. Attendees expressed concern about a potential lack of educational assistants or teachers to teach to the increased number of students:

“In my mind, we are trying to create more space, if we create more space will there be enough staff?”

Concerns were raised about the social impact of having kids attend a school outside of their community; there was concern they would be the outsiders and miss out on the opportunity to connect with their neighbourhood peers. Larger schools and larger class sizes were also noted as having a negative impact on the children by making it harder for some children to speak up or connect with peers:

“Kids being bused into the community have no connection to the school. Will my kid be the outsider?”

“We start here, we want to finish here. My shy kid doesn’t want to move into a new school, it would be horrible.”

The sense of community was a dominant theme throughout the discussion. Concerns were raised about the community school serving kids from outside of the community, that any type of enrolment management mechanism could split up communities and that being in the community is safer for children (less risk from busing and more options for active transportation which foster independence in children):

“We picked this place for the sense of community.”

Several attendees noted that this is not a new problem, as enrolment was noted as a concern several years ago. They expressed frustration that the issue was not addressed and worried about the issue persisting as their children move through the school system.

Concerns about funding were also raised. One attendee noted the situation seems to be a result of underfunding and the need for a new school was raised.

What should EIPS consider, potential solutions and advice

After reactions and concerns were explored, the conversation turned to addressing what EIPS should value as it explores different processes or options and coming up with solutions. Attendees also were asked to provide one piece of advice to EIPS.

Once again, community figured largely in this part of the discussion. Attendees wanted EIPS to consider using parent and community voices to advocate for change at the municipal or provincial level. Many attendees were eager to help more broadly to create change that would benefit EIPS and their community, wanting to support the development of a long-term plan to address enrolment issues. Another attendee suggested EIPS should consider reaching out to community-based organizations in the area for help and these organizations' input will ensure that a great diversity of input is gathered (for example the Families First Society). It was also suggested that EIPS should consider thinking about the community in a geographical sense when changing the boundary lines, ensuring kids are close enough to their schools to use active transportation modes (walking and biking).

Adding more classrooms/class space was raised as something EIPS should consider, but this suggestion caused several attendees to voice concerns about educational standards. Some in attendance felt this would cause a lapse in education standards and strain available resources and could cause good teachers to leave. Some attendees suggested they might consider homeschooling if EIPS moved in this direction:

“It pains me to hear that quality education is something we value, but there is no classroom size cap. It’s important to me to have my kids in the community school but that makes me want to homeschool them or send them to a private school.”

One attendee suggested figuring out why parents want their children at James Mowat and using those findings to help improve enrolment at low enrolment schools.

Another central theme raised for EIPS consideration was communication. It was noted that not enough information was provided on the scope of the issue before the session for attendees to be able to provide informed advice and opinions. More communication and greater transparency throughout the process were requested. One attendee noted the impact of language and word choice on how the problem and solutions are perceived. They expressed concerns over the word lottery and many other participants agreed:

“Lottery implies a sense of luck – some kids will be lucky and some will not. No one wants their child’s education to be left to luck. It feels very random.”

Attendees raised several potential solutions, from increasing parent fundraising and advocacy to the long-term solution of building a new school. Short-term solutions focused on the current building included adding more portables or a second storey, changing the current boundaries to reflect the community boundaries, or creating outdoor classroom spaces. Another solution raised was to reach out to the City to access some of their underutilized spaces for classroom space. It was also suggested the Grade 5 or 6 students could be moved out of the building to junior high sooner creating more space for younger kids who can have a hard time with transitions.

Busing children to other schools as a solution was also discussed, but many attendees felt there were a lot of problems with this solution, from lengthy bus rides causing motion sickness to increasing EIPS liability. Some attendees also raised concerns about accessing local before and after school care in the neighbourhood if their children move schools.

When discussing a central piece of advice for EIPS, attendees once again raised the central themes of impact on children, community and communication. In addition to reiterating some of the potential solutions, it was also noted that EIPS should consider making busing more affordable or let people who are within the boundaries but don’t want to be a James Mowat Elementary access other schools. Attendees also agreed that a perfect solution would be difficult to find, and one raised the need for both a short and long-term plan.

As the conversation was wrapping up, attendees were canvassed for final comments, which mainly took the form of additional questions about the next steps and where to get more information. A few noted they did not think that an enrolment decision would impact them as they already have children at the school, so clearly the communication about options impacting current families should be enhanced.

Survey Feedback

The survey feedback reflects the comments and concerns noted in the open houses. The survey opened on June 14 and closed on June 28. Reminder advertisements were used on EIPS social media, and one reminder was sent out using the EIPS SchoolMessenger platform. In total, 103 people completed the survey.

The survey included a brief description of the issue facing James Mowat Elementary and then asked very similar questions to the ones covered during the open house sessions. There were four central themes repeated throughout the questions. While the questions were designed to gather nuanced details about respondents' reactions and solutions, repeated themes emerged across all the open-ended questions. The count number of mentions is noted in brackets and at times is higher than the number of respondents due to how their comments reflected a theme regardless of the topic of the question. These themes are areas of high concern and are key priority areas to the respondents:

- 182 mentions of separating current students or preventing siblings and community children from entering the school/the need to prioritize existing families staying in the school.
- 160 mentions of the need for a new school.
- 147 mentions of students not receiving adequate education or support/the need to prioritize quality education.
- 141 mentions of concern about current class sizes as too large and/or the need for smaller class sizes.

In addition to the high-count central themes, several more themes emerged across the responses:

- Concerns for teachers and staff (burnout) were noted with a priority on hiring more teachers and staff (41).
- A key priority and solution mentioned was to increase the number of portables (36).
- Prioritize rezoning or modifying school boundaries (30).
- Many respondents simply stated they are against a lottery process (29).
- The government needs to invest more funding/resources in public schools/ education (29).
- Need to improve planning for future student growth/be better prepared (25).

Additional themes for each question are presented below and the number of times a theme was mentioned is noted in brackets. Between 95 per cent and 92 per cent of respondents answered all the open-ended questions, with the exception of the final open-ended question, where only 31 per cent of respondents provided additional comments.

Initial Reaction

The first question asked for initial thoughts or opinions. Five additional themes were identified:

- General concerns expressed about current enrolment pressures (8)
- Need more information/need more information about the lottery system (3)
- Lack of/inadequate City infrastructure to accommodate future growth (3)
- School is old/outdated/in need of upgrades/renovations (2)
- Should stop accepting new students if already at full/overcapacity (2)

Concerns

Concerns for the school:

Next respondents were asked to note their concerns for the school regarding enrolment pressures. Three additional themes or concerns were identified:

- School is old/outdated/in need of upgrades/renovations (5)
- Lack of/poor school management/leadership (1)
- Bullying related concerns/issues (1)

Concerns for your family:

When asked what concerns they had for their family in this context, respondents provided the following additional themes or concerns:

- Changing primary transportation mode (e.g., having to bus now)/additional fees associated with transportation (7)
- Lack of/not enough teachers/available teachers (4)
- School is old/outdated/in need of upgrades/renovations (1)

Concerns for your community:

Respondents provided the following additional themes or concerns when asked about their concerns for their community:

- Lack of/inadequate City infrastructure to accommodate future growth (9)
- A decline in community culture/losing sense of community (6)
- Is causing division/stress/angst within the community (4)
- Lack of/not enough teachers/available teaching staff (3)
- Increased traffic volume in the community (2)
- Lack of/limited available parking spaces (2)
- Bullying-related concerns (1)

Priorities

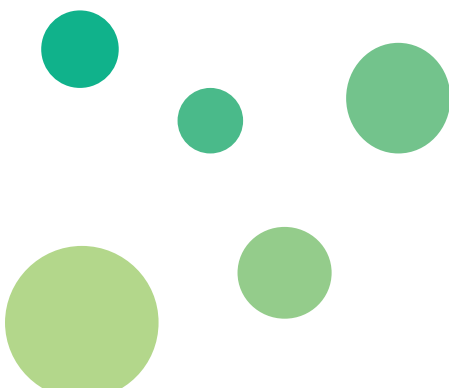
When asked “What should EIPS prioritize?” respondents identified four additional ideas:

- Prioritize mental health-related support/programs (1)
- Improve transparency/be more transparent with communication (1)
- Develop more specialized educational programs (1)
- Utilize available space at other schools for special needs-related educational programs (1)

Values

When asked “What values should be guiding EIPS?” the largest diversity of responses was provided resulting in thirteen additional themes:

- Community values/maintaining sense of community (9)
- Student safety/security/maintaining a safe school environment (7)
- Family values (5)
- Fairness/equality/equal opportunities (5)
- Respect (4)
- Compassion/empathy (3)
- Prioritize mental health-related support/programs (2)
- Consistency/ensuring consistency (2)
- Transparency/being transparent with communication (2)
- Relationships/relationship building (1)
- Integrity/honesty (1)
- Commitment/dedication (1)
- Accountability (1)



Solutions and Advice

Respondents were offered the opportunity to suggest potential solutions.

In addition to the potential solutions listed above, three more solutions were provided:

- Develop fundraising-related programs/events (1)
- Develop more specialized educational programs (1)
- Utilize available space at other schools for special needs-related educational programs (1)

We also asked respondents to provide one piece of advice for EIPS that they would like the organization to take away from this first phase of engagement. In addition to the key pieces of advice, eight additional themes or suggestions were received:

- Improve/increase the level and transparency of communication (8)
- Follow through with/listen to advice/feedback/suggestions provided (4)
- Upgrade/update/renovate school building (1)
- More focus on student safety/security/maintaining a safe school environment (1)
- Prioritize mental health-related support/programs (1)
- Improve school leadership/management (1)
- More focus on bullying-related concerns/issues (1)
- Be more proactive in addressing issues (1)

Final Comments

Finally, we offered respondents the opportunity to provide any closing comments.

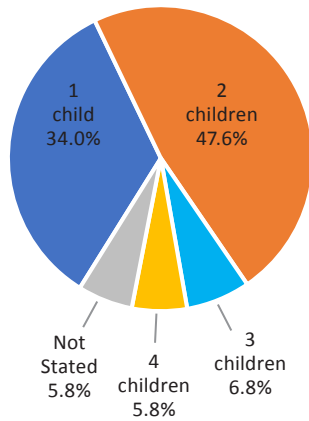
In addition to the main themes, these responses included:

- Need more information/details about enrolment-related pressures (2)
- Improve/increase the level of communication (2)
- Improve school leadership/management (1)
- Appreciate the opportunity to provide input/feedback (1)
- Ensure that school bus transportation is considered/arranged/planned (1)

Children in Household and Attending EIPS

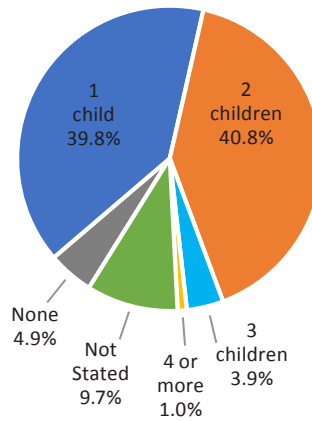
Respondents were asked about the number of children in their household, how many attend James Mowat Elementary and how many attend other schools in EIPS (see graphs below). Nearly 50 per cent of respondents had two children in their households, while close to 41 per cent had two children enrolled at James Mowat Elementary and 22 per cent had children enrolled in other EIPS schools.

How many school-aged children are in your household?* n=103

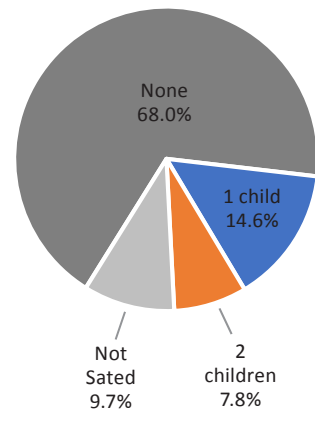


*No respondents selected none or five children or more

How many children do you currently have enrolled at James Mowat Elementary? n=103



How many children do you have enrolled in other EIPS schools?* n=103



*No respondents selected three children or four or more children

Postal Codes

Lastly, respondents were asked to input their postal code information. Only three respondents entered invalid postal codes. Comparing postal codes entered to the postal codes for the James Mowat Elementary catchment area, only six respondents were outside of the catchment.

Frequently Asked Questions – FAQs

During the open house, we tracked questions raised that were out of the scope of this phase of the engagement. Sharing answers to these questions prior to phase two of the engagement will demonstrate to school community members that they were heard and prevent similar questions from being raised again.

Scope of the issue questions:

1. What is the scope of the problem? How many extra kids?
2. How many schools are having this issue in Fort Saskatchewan?
3. What schools have more capacity?
4. Will the current enrolment issue continue for these kids when they enter high school?
5. What is the fire occupancy of James Mowat Elementary?

Boundaries questions:

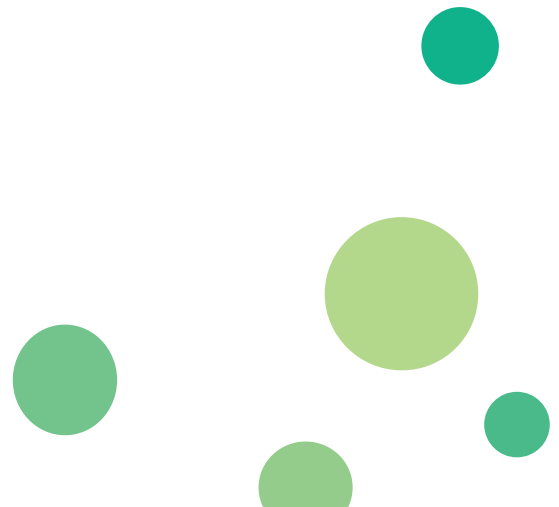
6. Is census data used to determine boundaries?
7. How are the current boundaries enforced?

Accessing/providing more support:

8. How can we get the City involved?
9. How can we support the Division?
10. What are the costs and what can the community fundraise for?

Possible solution details:

11. How would a lottery system work?



Conclusion

From the results of both the open house and survey, it's clear that parents and caregivers want more information about enrolment pressures along with clearer and more transparent communication about the issue and their opportunities to contribute to the conversation.

A solution that attendees and respondents favoured was adding more classrooms (portables, outdoor classrooms or using underutilized city spaces) as long as more teachers and support staff are added. A new school was also mentioned as a priority for parents and caregivers. If EIPS were to move forward with a solution where students currently enrolled in the school were moved out, it was suggested that it should be the older grades moving to junior high sooner and that keeping friends and siblings together should be a priority.

Many parents and/or caregivers expressed strong negative feelings about the use of a lottery system. Fears around the lottery system come from a strong sense of community that surrounds James Mowat Elementary. Attendees and respondents fear a lottery or any other mechanism to separate out children living in the community from attending their community school will damage that sense of community and the safety that comes from it resulting in long-term negative impacts on their children.



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