

# What We Heard James Mowat Elementary

Phase 2

 **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. James Mowat Elementary is at capacity for the 2022-23 school year, despite the addition of one modular classroom, and is projected to continue to be at or above enrolment capacity for subsequent years. 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.

The fall engagement, “Continuing the conversation”, consisted of one in-person facilitated open house discussion and an online survey, covered by this report. In total, nine people attended the session held on September 22 from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. in the James Mowat Elementary gymnasium. The online survey was open from September 22 to October 3, 2022, and a total of 91 survey responses were collected.

This engagement sought to collect feedback on the proposed enrolment solution, the random selection process pilot, and the three priority selection criteria. It asked:

1. What are your initial thoughts?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?
3. What do you overall think of the proposed solution?

During the open house, it was clear that parents were pleased to learn that current students would not be impacted and expressed concerns about busing costs and communication with new families to the James Mowat Elementary area.

*“I’m glad that children already attending James Mowat won’t have to leave.”*

While survey respondents had similar feedback as the open house attendees, they also expressed more diverse responses. For example:

- Parents should be able to pick the alternate designated school.
- Concerns about the work this process places on Administration.

While more than 40% strongly supported the proposed solution, nearly 25% were strongly opposed to the proposed solution when asked about their overall position.

## Methods

The purpose of the fall engagement was to inform the James Mowat Elementary community of the proposed solution developed by the EIPS to address the enrolment issue, which had been presented in the spring engagement, and to collect the community's reactions to the recommendation. To achieve this purpose, as we did in the spring session, two key public engagement methods were employed to gather insights from the James Mowat Elementary community: a facilitated open house 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, Y Station and EIPS completed several communication activities:

- Two weeks prior to the open house a letter was electronically delivered to all school families. It noted:
  - the date and time of the open house,
  - opportunity to participate via survey,
  - included links to the spring What We Heard (WWH) Report, and
  - the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ).
- A-frame signs were placed near the front of the school six days prior to the event
- An advertising spot ran on the local radio station MIX 107.9 seven times a day for six days preceding the event.

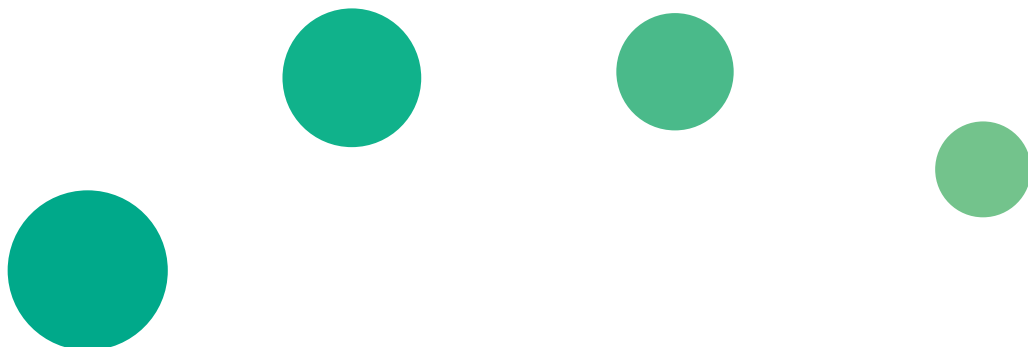
The open house was from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, September 22. Child minding was offered at the session to ensure parents with younger children felt welcome to fully participate and was accessed by attendees. Refreshments were also provided. A slide presentation, with handouts, was used so 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 house, an overview of the issue was provided, high-level themes from the spring WWH report were confirmed, and the proposed solution, the Random Selection Process Pilot was presented. The discussion focused on exploring these questions:

1. What are your initial thoughts?
2. What are the strengths of this approach?
3. How could this process be improved?
4. Overall, what is your position with regard to this approach?

The survey opened the same day as the open house. The survey preamble gave participants similar information to what was presented at the open house, an overview of the issue, proposed solution, and scenarios. The survey participants were then asked the same open-ended questions from the open house and then were asked a few questions about the number of children they have at James Mowat School or enrolled in another EIPS school, 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.

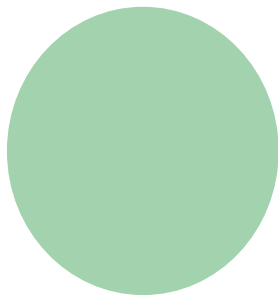
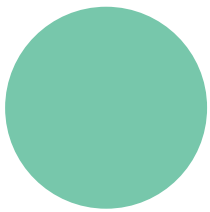


## Results

Themes from the open house mirror themes that emerged in the survey. Overall, the conversations in the open house were respectful. There was no major disagreement among the attendees. The survey was completed by 91 participants over the 12 days it was open.

## Open House

In total, 9 people attended the open house which lasted just over one hour. Clarification questions were asked during the scenario presentation and the overall response to the proposed solution was positive. Questions were raised around enrolment cut-off dates, the timing for when families would be notified about enrolment decisions, and what the alternative designated school after James Mowat Elementary would be.



### Initial reaction

The initial reaction to the proposed solution, the Random Selection Process pilot, was very positive. Some attendees felt the solution was “perfect” as it did not impact their families. When asked to consider new families in the area they still felt the proposed solution was acceptable and that it was reasonable at the moment. Concerns were raised regarding busing and busing costs.

When asked what word they would use for this solution people indicated ‘fair’ and ‘effective’.

### Strength of this approach

A key strength of this approach noted by attendees is that this does not affect current families and students. Disruptions to current students were a key concern raised in the spring session. Some attendees noted the priority selection criteria were well thought out.

Many stressed the importance of ensuring those families in the random selection process know the results as soon as possible so that they have time to plan and make alternative arrangements. It was noted that the earlier the families know, the fairer it will be for everyone.

### Could this process be improved?

Attendees reiterated the importance of communication in this part of the discussion. They felt it was important to make sure new families understood as soon as possible that their children might not be able to attend James Mowat Elementary. They also felt it would be worth letting real estate agents know so they can communicate the process to families looking to move into the area. Several attendees felt that clear information on the school website and the division’s website was crucial.

*“Frustrating for families if they do not know this when they move into the area”*

## Survey Feedback

The survey opened on September 22 and closed on October 3, 2022. Reminder advertisements were used on EIPS social media, and two reminders were sent out using the EIPS school messenger platform. In total, 91 people completed the survey. The survey feedback reflects a greater diversity of opinions than the feedback gathered at the open house, but the overall response to the proposed solution was positive.

A key theme that emerged, reflected in the open house feedback, was regarding keeping siblings/families and/or peers attending the same school. Over 55 comments addressed this concern. Most respondents appreciated that the approach allowed for siblings to stay together, and some expressed concerns that siblings and/or would be split up. The second key theme, also reflected in the open house feedback, was concerns regarding busing. Most concerns centred on costs and who should be responsible for covering busing fees.

All the themes for each question are presented below and the number of times a theme was mentioned is noted in brackets. The number of mentions is at times higher than the number of respondents, due to the ability to provide more than one response to each question.

### Initial Reaction

The first question asked respondents for their initial thoughts and 84 per cent provided comments. The comments ranged from support for the random selection process pilot (22) to concerns similar to those expressed in phase one about siblings and peers being separated (16). Other mentions include:

- Student enrolment should only be available to families living within the attendance area (13)
- Students attending alternative designated school should not have to pay busing fees or provided a reduced rate (12)
- Need to build another local elementary school/additional school (7)
- Ensure that students currently enrolled remain at designated school (6)
- Need to change/review/revise school boundaries/attendance area (4)
- Concerned that my child(ren) may have to switch/change schools (3)
- Need to expand school/add more modular classrooms (2)
- Concerned about current enrolment limitations/pressures (2)
- Should allow parents to choose an alternate designated school (2)
- Random selection process sounds too complicated/confusing (2)
  - the process was confusing for those who did not seem to grasp the sibling rule, they seemed to think that children from the same family would be split up, as such favoured revised boundaries



- Need more information/details about the random selection process (2)
  - respondents would like to know what is the alternative designated school, the current boundaries for James Mowat Elementary, and the maximum number of children per classroom

#### Single mentions

- I do not support the random selection process
- Concerned about students receiving inadequate support/education/attention

*“My initial thoughts are that it does seem like a fair way to do things if James Mowat cannot handle the number of students applying.”*

*“My initial reaction is that it super sucks. I have a three under five so this means every year the next enters kindergarten age it’s a random lottery. It’s ridiculous that I would have this anxiety about if my children will be allowed to attend the same school.”*

*“This scenario is nice for the children who are already attending James Mowat to keep doing so. I think it seems like a fair way of managing the pressures.”*

### Strength of this approach

Next respondents were asked to note any strength of the approach and 70 per cent provided comments. Resoundingly, respondents felt the strength of the approach was that siblings will stay together (26) and current students will remain at the school (18). A small number of respondents indicated no strength in the approach (8). Other mentions include:

- Is an unbiased/fair approach (16)
- Students that live within attendance area are given enrolment priority (7)
- Is a well-planned approach (2)

*“It seems to affect fewer people than the alternatives.”*

*“It does allow families the option to keep all kids together in one school should they wish while also prioritizing children who live in that designated area.”*

*“Keeps those children who are already attending the school with their friends and maintains consistency. Has pre-set rules about those joining the school and gives options to choose between James Mowat and another designated school.”*

## Weaknesses of this approach

Respondents were also asked to note any weaknesses of the approach and 73 per cent provided comments. The top weakness identified was a concern for children not being able to attend a school close to where they live (21). Other weaknesses ranged from busing fees (11) to noting concerns about classroom size (2). Other mentions include:

- Concerned that siblings/families may not be able to attend the same school (12)
- I dislike/do not support the random selection process/is a bad idea (7)
  - respondents do not like that anything is left to chance, they plan where to live around the schools their children will attend and expect to be able to attend the school they are in the boundary for
- Does not accommodate/consider the needs of all families (6)
- Stress/anxiety-related concerns (5)
- The random selection process sounds too complicated/confusing (3)
- Concerned about my child(ren) being split up from their friends/peers (3)
- Administrative-related concerns/issues/workload (2)
- The approach allows students to register that live outside of the designated area (2)

Single mentions

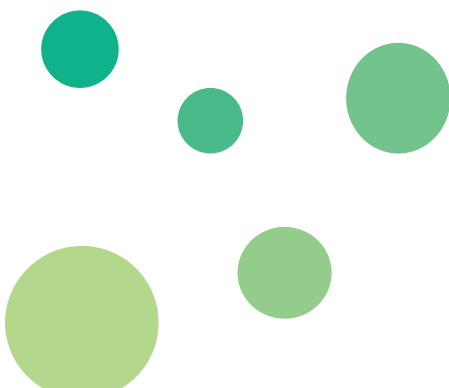
- Is a short-term/temporary solution
- Concerned about student growth/enrolment pressures/limitations
- None/no weakness

*“Those that don’t get selected, their children will potentially be on a bus for longer than they would be otherwise. Possibly a reduced rate for that scenario.”*

*“The weakness is that this is just a short-term solution that will eventually need to be addressed with a new school.”*

*“Stress if you have two children already attending that the third child may or may not get in.”*

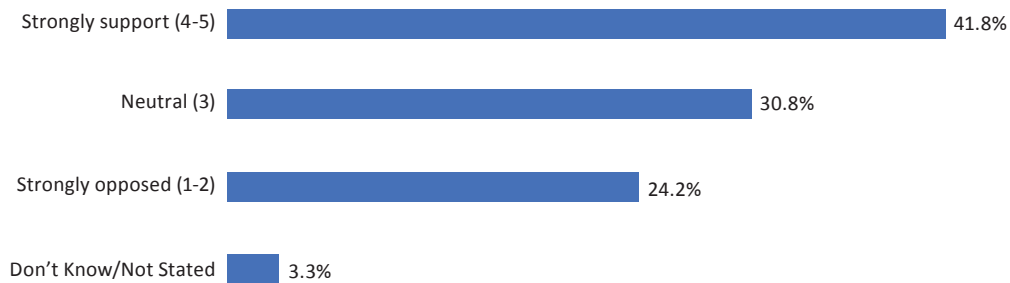
*“I feel it still puts pressure to keep class sizes very large.”*



## Overall, what is your position with regard to this approach?

Respondents were then asked to rate their position about the random selection process pilot. Under half of the respondents noted strong support for the approach and close to one-third were neutral about the approach.

### Strongly support position with regard to this approach (n=91)



## Final Comments

Finally, we offered respondents the opportunity to provide any closing comments and 41 per cent entered a closing comment. The most frequently mentioned concern was that students/families may not be able to attend school close to where they live (9) followed by statements about public education funding (7), funding statements centre around class size and a new school. Other mentions include:

- Need to improve planning for future student growth/be better prepared (4)
- Need to change/review/revise school boundaries/attendance area (4)
- Concerned about cost of student busing/transportation fees (3)
- Concerned that siblings/families may not be able to attend the same school (3)
- Concerned about increasing class sizes/classes becoming too large (3)
- Concerned about teacher workload/burnout (2)
- I like/support the random selection process/is a good/fair idea (2)

### Single mentions

- Bullying related concerns
- Should allow parents to choose alternate designated school

*“Seems well thought out and gives priority to siblings of students who are already attending.”*

*“Our schools are hurting for student supports. They have been pulled away by the Alberta government and our kids are suffering. This also puts additional pressure on teachers who are being asked to provide even more to students with fewer resources.”*

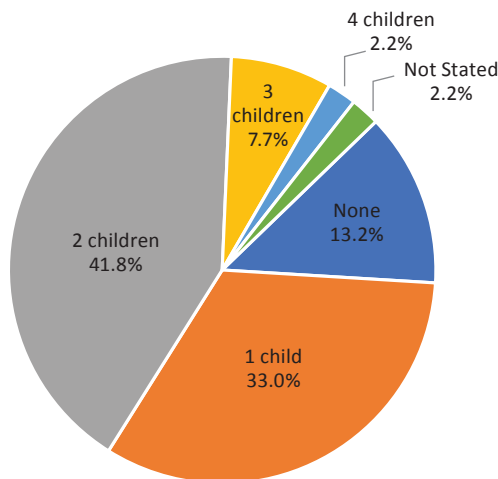
*“Although new schools obviously cannot happen magically, the government neglect of public education is very clear.”*

*“I think that if this method prioritizes students in the area that already have a sibling attending the school that this is the most important. Separating families or making children bus to a different school when they are walking distance to a school seems silly.”*

### Children in Household and Attending EIPS

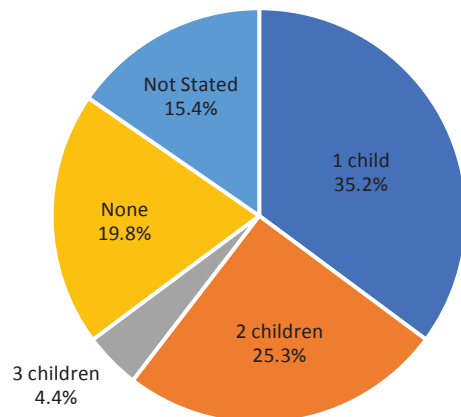
Respondents were asked about the number of children in their household, how many attend James Mowat Elementary, how many future children will attend EIPS and how many attend other schools in EIPS (see graphs below). Just over 40 per cent of respondents had two children in their households, while 65 per cent had children enrolled at James Mowat Elementary, 45 per cent have one or more children that will attend EIPS in the future and 23 per cent had children enrolled in other EIPS schools.

How many school-aged children are in your household? (n=91)



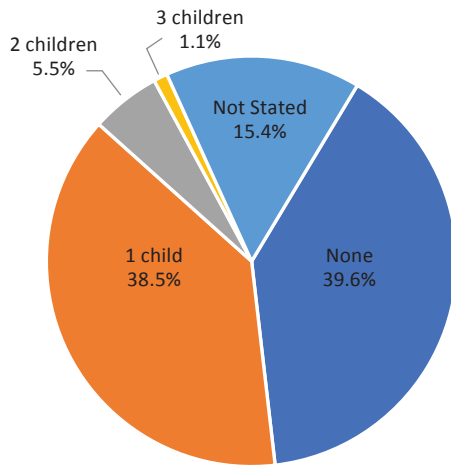
\*No respondents selected five children or more

How many children do you currently have enrolled at James Mowat Elementary? (n=91)



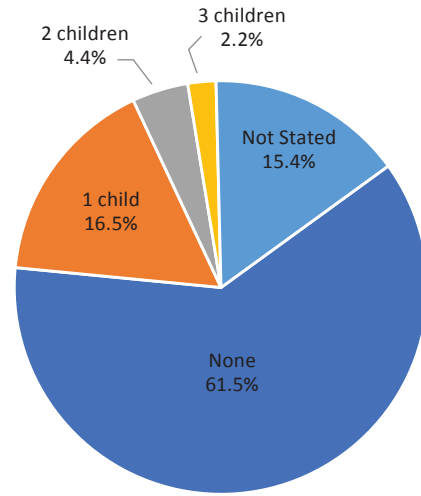
\*No respondents selected four children or more

How many younger children do you have, not yet in school, who will attend an EIPS school in the future? (n=91)



\*No respondents selected four children or more

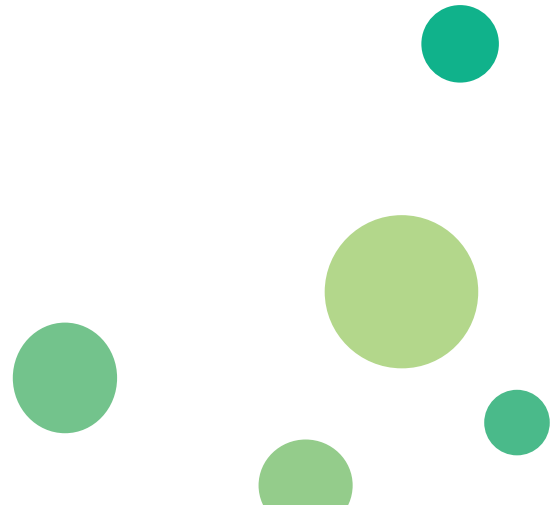
How many children do you have enrolled in other EIPS schools? (n=91)



\*No respondents selected four children or more

### Postal Codes

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



## Conclusion

From the results of both the open house and survey, it's clear that parents and caregivers are generally satisfied with the proposed solution, but they remained concerned about specific items, including:

- siblings and peers being separated;
- busing costs; and
- information sharing with new families to a catchment area of James Mowat Elementary.

A few survey respondents noted dislike for the name of the solution, random selection process pilot, and find it confusing. Some of the sentiments expressed indicate that not all survey respondents fully understood the random selection process pilot; this was indicated by the fears and weaknesses they expressed. Moving forward, EIPS should consider a few actions. First, the random selection process explanation needs to be simplified, using plain language and with a focus on siblings staying together. Include visuals to help explain the process. Provide the alternate designated school in communications ahead of the enrolment deadline. Ideally, a designated individual or email address is listed in communications for people to contact with questions and concerns. Lastly, set a review and evaluation date for the Random Selection Process Pilot to ensure the process is functioning as intended.

*"I understand there is no easy solution to this and I think no matter what this is going to end not so great for some families."*

*"I feel it is fair to try to direct new additions to the school to other schools that have space."*

*"This scenario is nice for the children who are already attending James Mowat to keep doing so. I think it seems like a fair way of managing the pressures."*



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