

The Benefits of a Positive Relationship between Parents, School Councils, Trustees & Boards

Trina Boymook, EIPS Board Chair & Jacquie Surgenor, EIPS COSC Chair

Jacquie

We are very excited to be able to present to you about how a positive relationship between, trustees, parents, school councils and boards has benefited all parties in Elk Island Public Schools. At the root of our success is a fundamental belief that parents are partners in education. The third priority in our 3 year District Education Plan states “Enhance public education through effective engagement, partnerships and communication” and the first goal is “Parents are Partners.” The relationships we’ve developed facilitates the conversation. We may not always agree, but we aren’t scared to have the discussion and we generally walk away with a greater understanding of the other’s perspective and the rationale behind it. Neither party feels threatened if we aren’t on the same page, but rather, we feel thankful that the other is open to listening and discussing.

We thought we would present two case studies demonstrating these benefits; the first at a school council level and the second at a division level.

Part 1 School Council & Trustee Relationship Case Study: Westboro School Council

Jacquie

I chair the school council at Westboro and Trina has been our trustee rep for 2.5 years. Each school council in Elk Island has a trustee rep who attends their meetings. Trina attends our school council meetings and has embedded herself in our school community and has attended various events hosted by our council as well. As a consistent figure at our school council meetings, she has cultivated a relationship with parents which can give a parent who has questions or concerns an established connection and positive relationship to work through concerns or questions

Our Trustee is able to bring forward division information and we are able to learn about the division from a trustee and Board perspective. I welcome that direct approach. As a chair, I find it especially helpful to not have to bring these things forward myself. A recent example would be with the updating of our Board Policy 19: Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning and Working Environments. Trina presented the draft policy and asked for feedback. There was a lot of anxiety around that time with regards to this policy. Parents were able to engage directly with her and I believe that the resulting conversation helped parents truly understand the Board’s direction and intention and it helped alleviate potential fears. It also created a deeper understanding so that when they filled in the survey, the feedback was even more valuable. By having the conversation, our trustee was able to answer questions and explain what the Board

was thinking and planning which empowered our parents. In turn, these parents were able to take the information from the meeting and share with other parents and steer any concerns to Trina which calmed the greater community as well.

Trina's Board Reports at our School Council meetings builds knowledge in our parent community. It provides an important perspective. As our elected representative, it often completes the feedback loop in a direct way as well. Her reports are included in our minutes, as are the questions and corresponding answers which helps the parents who can't or don't attend the meetings.

Trina

When you have a trustee sitting at your table you have access to someone who is very close to the inner operation of the school division and who owns the responsibility to set the direction for the school division. A Trustee is also someone who is connected to local and provincial elected officials and is someone who has built relationships with community leaders. A trustee at your school council meeting can provide background information to assist with the discussion that is taking place at the meeting or connect them to the information that they require. As Jacquie has said I have been able to provide clarification and address questions at School Council meetings. Using her Policy 19 Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe learning and working environment example. There were a number of questions and concerns around what the minister had mandated Boards to complete by March 31 and the Guidelines that were later released in January. This is a fine example of circumstances where the principal may not be in a position to answer all the questions that the parents have, but the trustees is able to. There are multiple reasons for this. One is the Board and the Superintendent work very closely together as the superintendent is the Board's sole employee who they delegate to carry out the will of the board and the person who they also delegate the daily options of the school division to. The direction that a division takes typically starts with a generative discussion between the Board and their Superintendent. Even though some things are in the Superintendent's sand box, the Board remains informed of what is taking place within the sandbox because the superintendent is accountable to the Board for those things delegated to them. Due to the political nature of the work around Bill 10 and the Guidelines the Board and the Superintendent are very tightly connected through the development of the Board Policy and the supporting Administrative Procedures. The board is also connected to information that is coming out of the Minister's office too. This is what I mean by that a trustee is very close to the inner workings of the division. So when it comes to things that are coming out of the division the Trustee is at times in the position to provide greater detail than perhaps the principal can provide. They can also breakdown the decisions of the Board to build understanding of the direction that the division is taking. Connect the school council's work with potential partners and resources in the community. Basically a trustee is a resource for a school council.

On the flip side the school council is a resource for my work as a trustee. It puts the feedback we are receiving into context. The established relationship allows people to be more candid with

me. When they are more comfortable with you, you get better quality information to work with. Allows you to catch misinformation within the community and provide clarity of the Board's direction and or intent. School Council is our connection to those that have a direct vested interest in education.

Part 2 COSC & Trustee/Board Relationship Case Study: Elementary Report Cards

Jacquie

Our Committee of School Councils is very embedded in Elk Island Public Schools. Established in the late 1980s, it is parent driven: we decide the agenda and record the minutes. We meet monthly 8 times per year. On average there are 15-20 school council reps, 3-5 trustees, our Superintendent and 2-3 senior staff, as well as the staff liaison person. It transitions from the me to we (school council to division) and really engages parents at a deeper level. It is a community we can turn to when we need help and support; both from other school council chairs and reps, but also from our trustees.

For this case study, we will be looking at the revamping of our elementary report cards.

Jacquie

The issue around parental dissatisfaction with the then current elementary report cards was added to the agenda and after a brief presentation from the district, parents were able to provide feedback and voice their frustration with the outcome based report cards and the EPAL (Excellent, Proficient, Acceptable and Limited assessment system. Parents were very passionate and had strong opinions about how their children's successes and challenges were being formally reported to them.

Elk Island knew they needed to create a new report card as teachers were unhappy as well. In line with Parents as Partners, they realized that a parent voice was important to include from the beginning. I credit that with the direction from the Board of Trustees to engage parents, and with our COSC for requesting the conversation and feedback and updates.

The Communicating Student Learning committee was formed and 2 members from COSC were invited to sit on it as parent representatives (they also had teachers, principals, trustees and central office staff). The Committee Chair reported back several times to COSC (and to school councils) and we had discussions about the progress so far. She was able to gather feedback, but just as important, trustees were able to listen to the parent perspective so that they felt fully prepared when the template was presented to them.

As a parent representative, I was able to share an important perspective with the committee. Updates were shared with COSC by the committee chair which enabled school council reps to take information back to their school councils as well.

Trina

The structure that we have developed for our COSC has allowed us to build leadership within our parent communities by working directly with school council representatives. Our COSC is a means for representatives from our school councils to come together to discuss educational issues and access information from school system decision makers. Our structure is set up so we are able to disseminate information effectively to our school councils through monthly meetings and/or our COSC email distribution.

Our meetings allow us to clarify information and build understanding. What is also enable us to do is to capture a parent's perspective on those things that we are working on. When we prepare for a large scale consultation we launch that discussion at a COSC meeting. This is another way we build leadership capacity within our parent groups. When they go back to have the discussion at the school council level they are equipped to set the stage for the discussion and take that lead role. As Jacquie mentioned through our report card development we began with a large scale consultation with parents and staff that informed what was to be achieved. We used our COSC to inform the finer detail pieces. Should it be a four point scale or a five?

What makes our COSC so effective? Number one it is parent driven. Our willingness to share information, enter into discussions and actively seek representative's perspectives has resulted in an informed parent group in which we have developed a trusting relationship with. It is through this trusting relationship our representatives will have very candid conversations where they are comfortable to discuss all sides of a topic. The benefits for us is we are provided with quality information that we can trust and work with, we have a structure that allows us to be more nimble when it comes to capturing a parents perspective and we have empowered our school councils to be leaders within their own individual school communities.

Closing

Jacquie

I've been a member of COSC for several years, and a member of school council for longer, and I value the relationship I have developed with my trustee rep and with the Board as a whole. As I have been able to get to know most of the trustees through my local school council, COSC or committees and events, I feel it enables me to share a parent perspective. Sometimes, it is just through a conversation at an event and other times it is via feedback at a meeting. It gives me a place to start when I have a question or concern. Even when they can't solve it, they will redirect me to the appropriate person, but I don't have to be overwhelmed trying to navigate that myself. On a personal level, it has allowed me to get to know some of the trustees on a personal level and to be able to consider them my friends.

Parents are embedded into the important process. Even with contentious issues, we have a respectful conversation. Our relationship is based on mutual trust because we know that we can achieve more by trusting and embracing each other and by fearing what the other will say or do. We are all invested in success for our students and children and I am truly excited about what we will be able to accomplish in the future.