

Alberta Education embarked on a public engagement process through the Inspiring Education Initiative and, at the provincial level, public engagement continues to be a priority area. The Alberta School Boards' Association (ASBA) identifies community engagement as vital to effective governance (ASBA, 2012). Furthermore, Elk Island Public Schools' (EIPS) Board of Trustees maintains community engagement as a strategic priority. To address this priority area, the meaningful engagement of parents is infused as a key outcome in each of the four goals within our 2013-2016 Three Year Education Plan.

An ad hoc committee was formed in the spring of April 2012 to develop one element of community engagement, parent engagement. The committee developed the beginning of a parent engagement framework that reflects local values and priorities. The committee used several resources to guide their recommendations: *On-Ramp to Community Engagement in Public Education* (ASBA, 2012); research on community engagement (Ferguson, Jordan and Baldwin, 2010); and, personal experiences of the committee members. In 2012/2013, the Committee of School Councils and various School Councils participated in a workshop designed to further delineate parent engagement in EIPS.

#### **Elk Island Public Schools' Community Engagement Guiding Principles:**

- Community engagement enables school boards to implement effective governance informed by their community's views and values. The decisions school boards make are complex. To make the best decisions, school boards need to understand and include relevant information, views, needs and interests. Community engagement allows school boards to gather this information (ASBA, 2012).
- Community engagement is the framework of policies, principles and techniques which give our *publics and stakeholders* opportunities to inform and influence the decisions that affect them and/or decisions in which they are interested (ASBA, 2012).
- Community engagement is about building solid, ongoing relationships rather than those that are issues-related and sporadic. We all need to accept that true community engagement is more than inviting parents to school board meetings or sending out newsletters to let them know what is going on in their schools (Dave Hancock, CASS Connections, Fall, 2011).

#### **Elk Island Public Schools' Parent Engagement Belief Statements:**

- There are many ways in which parents and schools engage with one another to ensure that every child is successful.
- Parent engagement is affected by a variety of variables. Multiple approaches to engagement are required.
- Engagement between parents and schools is a shared responsibility based on collaboration, trust, and respect.
- Engagement is continuous throughout a child's life and engagement changes over time.
- Engagement happens everywhere children learn: at home, at school, and the community. Engagement strategies must be responsive to the particular learning environment.
- Engagement is on-going, integrated in planning, and reflects sustained efforts.

- All forms of engagement have value.

### Three Types of Parent Engagement:

- **Elk Island Public Schools (EIPS) believes parent engagement enhances student achievement and success.**  
EIPS supports parents' engagement reinforcing children's learning in the home.
- **Elk Island Public Schools (EIPS) believes parent engagement at the school level contributes to school success and continuous improvement.**  
EIPS supports parental engagement at the school level.
- **Elk Island Public Schools (EIPS) believes parent engagement at the division level contributes to division success and continuous improvement.**  
EIPS supports parent engagement at the division level.

### Levels of Parent Engagement

- **Inform** - To provide parents with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions (e.g. websites, fact sheets)
- **Consult** - To obtain parent feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions (e.g. focus groups, surveys).
- **Involve** - To work directly with parents throughout a process to ensure that parent concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered (e.g. workshops, deliberative polling).
- **Collaborate** - To partner with parents in each aspect of the decision making including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution (e.g. citizen advisory committees, consensus building).

Based on International Association for Public Participation (IAPP, 2007)

### How to determine the most “appropriate” level of parent engagement?

Outlining the types and levels of parent engagement is the first step in establishing a parent engagement framework. A second and critical step is determining the most 'appropriate' level of engagement for projects/initiatives— particularly at the school and division levels.

In some cases, there are legislative and/or policy parameters that provide direction about the level of engagement.

The following outlines the areas covered by the School Council Regulation, Alberta School Council Resource Manual, Alberta Education Guide to Planning and Reporting (2013), and, Elk Island Public Schools (EIPS) Policies and Administrative Procedures.

- The Superintendent and Principals have an obligation under the *School Councils Regulation* (updated 2007) to provide school councils the opportunity to be involved in Division and School Education Plans and Results Reports and to share results and interpretation of Accountability Pillar measures (see EIPS Administrative Procedure 100).
- The EIPS Administrative Procedure 110 (29) – *School Councils and Committee of School Councils* states – “At least one of the Committee of School Council (COSC) meeting agendas shall include a presentation of budget information for the Division. This meeting will be scheduled prior to budget approval by the Board of Trustees to afford the opportunity for input by School Councils.”
- The EIPS Administrative Procedure 518 (3) - *Financial Management* states, “Principals and Site Managers shall provide budget information to their respective school councils and staff prior to the budget submission, and at other times as deemed necessary.”
- The EIPS Administrative Procedure 505 (2.3) – *School & Administrative Fees – Fee Determination & Approval Process* – states “The Principal will present and discuss proposed fees at a School Council meeting prior to submission to the Executive Team.”
- As per EIPS Administrative Procedure 110 (10) – *School Councils and Committee of School Councils* – “The Principal shall be the primary administrative resource for the School Council. The Principal shall assist the School Council Chair in establishing meeting agendas”.

This legislative and policy framework also outlines information that must be provided to the Superintendent on an annual basis.

- The EIPS Administrative Procedure 110 (5) – *School Councils and Committee of School Councils* – “The School Council shall submit a copy of the bylaws/guiding principles/operating procedures and/or amendments to the Superintendent for information by September 30.”
- The *School Council Regulation* (6) states – “The School Council shall submit, to the Superintendent by September 30, an annual report for the previous year containing:
  - A summary of the activities of the School Council during the school year
  - Financial statements of the School Council, if any
  - The statements of registered societies which report through the School Council, if any.

It is important to note that the majority of decisions regarding the level of parental engagement is based on a commitment to the EIPS Parent Engagement Belief Statements. The selection of the ‘appropriate’ level of parent engagement is a balance among parent and staff expectations, the potential impacts of initiatives/decisions, and, the level of resources available (including time).

ASBA (2012) suggests that school boards use the framework developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAPP, 2007) to guide a systemic approach to parent and community engagement. EIPS believes that consideration of the following questions should be part of the decision-making around the level of parent engagement:

- What are the potential impacts to students and families?
- How important are the potential impacts to students and families?
- What is the potential for student/families concerns relating to the project/decision?
- How much are students and families invested in the problem/opportunity to be addressed and the decision to be made?
- What degree of participation do students and families appear to want?
- Are there legal/policy guidelines in place regarding the required level of participation?

- What is the potential for students and families to impact the decision-making process?
- What levels of resources are available to support participation?

Generally speaking, the degree of impact and the level of student/family investment in projects/initiatives, should guide the decision about the 'appropriate' level of engagement.

Finally, an important component of the success of any engagement initiative is clarity in the process. There must be clear communication about the following:

- Is student and family feedback needed prior to a decision?
- What is the rationale for the decision regarding the need for student and family feedback?
- What are the opportunities for student and family feedback?
- How will student and family feedback be used in the process?
- How was student and family feedback used in the process?
- What is the decision-making process?

As Alberta Education and school divisions embark on the processes to build the statutory and policy frameworks for the implementation of the Education Act, additional opportunities will be available to further refine the parent engagement framework.

Please see Appendix 1 for additional information on parent engagement.