

Public involvement vital part of public education

“Education makes us what we are.” French philosopher Claude-Adrien Helvetius.

The education of young people may be the single most important activity any community can undertake. Alberta has a long and proud history of providing for the public education of children, starting with the creation of the first school board in Edmonton in 1884. By the time Alberta came into existence in 1905, school boards throughout the province were helping to develop the leaders and citizens of a new province.

The 62 locally elected school boards in operation today continue to play a significant role in shaping the economic and social strength of local communities. While the provincial government provides funding, it is the school board’s job to ensure all children receive a quality education and emerge from public school as well-rounded citizens. School boards largely do that by independently setting policies and making decisions about the direction and quality of education at the local level.

As elected officials, school board trustees are accountable to the voters. As stewards of millions of dollars in public funds, they are accountable to taxpayers. And as people entrusted with the care and education of children, they are responsible to parents and the community-at-large.

This accountability means school board trustees need to constantly stay in touch with community stakeholders. By doing so, trustees are in a better position to understand, and reflect in their decision-making, what all citizens value and want from their local public schools. Examples of board policies that are affected by community input include determining when schools are open during the year and setting behaviour standards for students and others while at school.

School boards realize they can’t do their job effectively without public awareness and input. But maintaining a high standard of quality in public education is difficult if a community doesn’t know or care what their local school board is doing. That’s why school boards try to address public education issues openly, communicate their decisions broadly, and be accessible to anyone with concerns, ideas or suggestions.

All citizens can have a say in what children learn but they must take an interest in what their local school board is doing in order to be heard. They must let trustees know if their information needs are not being met. They should participate in issue discussions and, as a democratic responsibility, vote at election time.

At XYZ School Board, we are interested in what you have to say. We are also available to speak to any group that would like to hear more about what we do and why. Please call the district (division) office at 000-0000 to find out more or check out our website at _____. For more information on school boards in general, log onto the Alberta School Boards Association’s website at www.asba.ab.ca

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Sidebar to main article

School board trustees wear many hats

As elected officials, school board trustees wear many hats, making decisions based on the needs of the entire jurisdiction rather than any one school, neighbourhood or community.

- **Communicators:** Trustees ensure the community has a say in what children learn by communicate effectively with stakeholders and ensuring their concerns and wishes are heard.
- **Planners:** Trustees develop plans to deal with student needs and to actively participate in the economic and social strength of local communities.
- **Policy Makers:** Trustees create policies to guide administration and staff. They also evaluate the impact of these policies and make adjustments where necessary.
- **Advocate:** Trustees address and seek resolution of public education issues of importance to students, parents, and the community at large.
- **Educators:** Trustees play a key role in developing tomorrow's citizens because they have the ability to make independent decisions that impact the direction and quality of public education.
- **Adjudicators:** Trustees hear and make judgments concerning local education decisions, procedures or policies that individuals, groups or the public feel are unfair or improper.
- **Legislators:** Trustees can make decisions that have the status and impact of law. For example, decisions governing and enforcing the conduct of students and staff.
- **Politicians:** Trustees are elected every three years to govern the local public education system on behalf of the community. The democratic process ensures the public remains part of public education.
- **Lobbyists:** Trustees communicate with the municipal and provincial levels of government to ensure those who influence funding and other resources hear the voice of the local community.