



on Public Involvement  
in Public Schools

## Goals

- Identify strategies to more effectively engage the public.
- Engage the public in a discussion about how school boards can better listen, inform and involve them.
- Develop expertise among school boards in public consultation.
- Raise the visibility of school boards.

## Theme

Putting the Public back into Public Education

## Key Messages

- Public input and support is key to maintaining excellence in public education.
- It's important school boards provide ways for the public to have on-going input into school division plans and programs.
- Communications with the public has to be a two-way street.
- We want the public to be more informed and involved.
- We want to put the public back into public education.

## Elements

1. *Summit on Public Involvement in Public Schools* March 13 and 14, 2009 at the Shaw Convention Centre in Edmonton. Staff from the Community Development Branch of Alberta Culture and Community Spirit will facilitate the sessions. Invited participants will include members of the public, school boards and representatives of our education partners. School boards will participate in the selection of public delegates.
2. Discussions with the public by local school boards prior to the March, 2009 Summit.
3. Focus on community engagement topics and training at the ASBA fall general meeting November 16-18, 2008.

4. On-line survey hosted on ASBA's website that can be voluntarily completed by anyone across the province.
5. Focus groups hosted by ASBA and involving randomly selected adults with children in school, adults without children and adults without children in school.
6. A best practices review to discover and itemize best practices in public engagement as it pertains to public education.
7. Summary document of the input collected prior to the Summit for the consideration of Summit participants.

## Questions to Ask

This initiative is about listening, not delivering information and answering questions. It's a chance to hear from the public what they think is important in public education and how we can do a better job of engaging them in what we do. Questions to ask should be open ended and allow the public to express a wide range of thoughts and ideas. This will encourage dialogue and leave the impression that your school board is sincere in its wish to improve public input and involvement.

Here are some suggested questions to pose in your public sessions:

1. What do they know of your school board and the school system that you govern?
2. What would they like to know?
3. How do they get information about your school board and school system now?
4. How would they prefer to get information about what you do?
5. Do they feel they have an opportunity for input into what the school board does?
6. Would they like to have that opportunity?
7. Are they happy with the level of involvement they have?
8. What level of involvement would they like?
9. What barriers exist that prevent them from providing input or being better informed?

## Ways to Gain Public Input

Some school boards may already have mechanisms in place that it uses to proactively gather public input. For those that don't, here are some methods you may wish to try. We would hope you would do at least one of these prior to the Summit in March so we can include your jurisdiction's feedback in our summary report.

### 1. Focus groups

Focus groups provide people with an opportunity to express their views in a group environment. Dialogue between participants often helps to spur ideas and crystallize thinking so the reasons behind an opinion or perspective can be better understood. A focus group is led by a moderator who objectively solicits comments and probes for understanding. A school board hosting a focus group should not become engaged in conversation with participants. If present, Trustees should simply listen and observe.

Focus groups are usually 2 hours or less in length. Typically, they are face-to-face sessions but can also be done via audio conferencing. The recommended size is 12 or fewer people. Participants are recruited randomly by telephone. Quotas for age and gender are usually set to ensure a demographic mix.

### 2. Round tables

Round tables provide an opportunity for people to share and discuss ideas, opinions and perspectives. It is more interactive and less formal than a focus group. While facilitated, a round table format does encourage dialogue between school board trustees and those invited to attend. Dialogue, however, should centre on exploring views and opinions raised by participants.

Round tables are typically 2-3 hours in length. The recommended size is 20 or fewer people. Participants are normally recruited through established lists supplied by the school board or by an allied group (e.g. chamber of commerce, School Councils, MLAs, etc.)

### 3. Public meetings

Public meetings (sometimes called town halls) open the door for any interested member of the public to attend. This is an access friendly way of gathering information but restricts interactivity because of the number of attendees. Public consultation meetings begin by presenting background on the matter for discussion. Participants are then invited to ask questions and provide comment/input. Organizers may choose to present information and ask for input in segments. This is a useful technique if there are a series of common questions to be asked or complicated bundles of information to be explained.

Public meetings are usually held at night and should be 3 hours or less in length. Participation is solicited through advertising, media articles and third party word-of-mouth.

### 4. Surveys

Surveys can be done in many formats: written, telephone or on-line. The key to a good survey is the flow and unbiased nature of the questions. This encourages people to complete the survey and adds credibility to the results. Hiring a professional researcher to design a survey is a good investment.

A survey should take less than 5 minutes to complete, not including the open-ended questions. Respondents should have the option to remain anonymous. The best response rates occur when a survey is administered by telephone or via the Internet.

A discussion guide should be developed to support written or on-line administered surveys. Such a guide gives potential respondents a focus for their feedback. The guide should provide a synopsis of discussion points and pose the questions you are seeking input on.

## 5. Written submissions

Typically in a public consultation written submissions are solicited from organized groups regarding their comments and feedback on an issue. This can be extended, however, to individuals and promoted through the media, company newsletters, print advertising, websites, mall/grocery store flyers and other avenues. In the case of individuals it is usually helpful to solicit written input by providing a form or questionnaire for people to fill out.

A discussion guide should accompany all direct mail requests for written input. It should also be posted on the school board web site.

## 6. Organization Agendas

Soliciting an opportunity to be part of a key community or business organization's executive or general meeting agenda is another way to gather input. The membership of chambers of commerce, service clubs, community associations, agricultural societies, sports groups and others are excellent cross-sections of the general public.

The request to get on a group's agenda is likely to meet with success if a limited amount of time is requested (suggest one hour) and the reasons given are pertinent to the organization. For example, the request to meet with a chamber of commerce should focus on the desire to determine how your school board can better engage the business community in local public education. Organizations that decline the request should be extended the invitation to submit comments and suggestions in writing.

## Fitting in With Existing Consultations

Some school boards may already have plans to do public consultation sessions this year on specific issues. We would suggest piggybacking questions on public engagement to those sessions. It is a golden opportunity to discover what the public thinks is important in public education and how you can do a better job of listening and informing. In all cases, we encourage school boards to go beyond traditional stakeholders and do consultation with the 70% of parents and taxpayers who do not have children in school.

## Need Advice or More Information?

Call ASBA at 780.482.7311. We have staff who are happy to help.



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