



Research summary of public perceptions

Prepared for the Summit on Public Involvement in Public Education

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This summary was prepared in support of the Alberta School Boards Association's 2009 *Putting the public back in public education* initiative.
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Introduction

In 2008, the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) launched an initiative to help school boards find ways to put the public back into public education. This is in response to the current lack of involvement in publicly funded education, particularly by those who do not have children in school. The ASBA believes the public's support is critical if excellence in public education is to be maintained.

Part of the initiative involved research into public perceptions and attitudes. Recently conducted focus groups, a telephone poll of 800 Albertans and an on-line web survey also sought input and suggestions from the public on how school boards can do a better job of reaching out to, informing and involving stakeholders.

This document provides a synopsis of the research results.

Focus groups

Nine focus groups composed of randomly selected Albertans were conducted during January, 2009 in Calgary (2), Edmonton (2), Grande Prairie, Athabasca, Stettler, Wainwright, and Lethbridge. Half involved adults with children in school; half did not have children or did not have children in school. Here is what they had to say:

- ✓ For parents, the major “connection” to the school system is through their children and the school they attend. School newsletters, parent/teacher meetings, school events and other contact provide them with information on education or school related issues. Beyond this type of regular communication with their children's school though, there were few participants with a more active connection or involvement with the system.
- ✓ Among non-parents, there was little direct or active connection to public education or the local school system at all.
- ✓ In keeping with those findings about involvement, most participants rated their overall awareness and understanding of public school boards and their role as low or very low.
- ✓ Except where the name of the local school district was obvious (e.g. Calgary, Edmonton, etc.) many of the participants in all the focus groups were unaware of the formal district name or names. Similarly, only a few participants in all of the sessions were aware of the name of a serving trustee or a senior district official, like the Superintendent.
- ✓ There were some participants who had a fairly good understanding of school boards and their functions – they are elected, they hire senior staff that in turn hire others, they manage the budget, set priorities for learning, etc. But most other participants admitted very little knowledge of school boards and the role they play.

- ✓ Even where participants knew (or guessed) that boards are responsible for the budget, there was little awareness of how the budget is determined and where the money comes from. There were participants who still believed boards set the education mill rate directly and collect local taxes. A few others were aware that the province now collects the tax and distributes the funds. Most did not know for sure.
- ✓ Regardless of how much participants knew, there was a consistent expectation that boards are (or should be) an important portal for parents and other members of the public to use for access to the education system with questions, concerns or complaints.
- ✓ While the discussions showed a very low level of understanding about the role of school boards, they also illustrated that where participants did have some awareness, they agreed that trustees have a significant impact on the quality of education.
- ✓ Some parents said they have no real desire to know more. Many said they are satisfied with the education their children receive, and therefore have no interest in getting more information. Non-parents in the sessions often agreed that they have little interest in knowing more, noting that because their children are no longer in school (or that they have no children at all), they have no personal stake in the activities of school boards on a day-to-day basis.
- ✓ There were some who believed more information should be available and that boards should make a greater effort to communicate. At a minimum, boards should make sure people know how to access information about the board if they are interested.
- ✓ A common suggestion for more effective communication by boards was to ensure that news and information is included in school communications, or at least, to distribute board communications through the schools.
- ✓ Discussion showed virtually no awareness of opportunities for public engagement that might exist. The low awareness led some participants to observe that people may simply be too busy or too disinterested to notice or to take advantage.
- ✓ Notwithstanding such comments, there were participants who believed school boards should do more to invite public involvement in education, or at least, to generate more awareness of the opportunities that do exist. They reasoned that if people were more aware they might engage more often, or at least, would have an option.
- ✓ Only a few participants expressed a personal interest in getting more involved with public education through serving on a task force or committee, volunteering, and so on. Suggestions about “topics” or issues that might interest them and encourage them to get involved included: curriculum and how it is set; school utilization (and potential closures); class sizes and parent/teacher ratios; busing policies and school bus procedures; and budget allocations/priorities.

Telephone and web surveys

In January, 2009, 800 randomly selected adult Albertans were called by a professional research firm and asked a series of questions. The calls were distributed in proportion to the actual population of the province. The margin of error for the statistical valid survey is +/- 3.5%, 19 times out of 20.

The same questions were posted on ASBA's website from January 19 to February 11, 2009. Any member of the public was encouraged to go on-line and fill it out. A total of 766 Albertans did so. Here are the results for both surveys:

***Please note:** some percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding or some people responding to questions that they did not know or were not sure.*

| Question 1: How aware would you say you are of your local school board in terms of its decisions? | | |
|--|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Survey type | Very or somewhat aware | Very or somewhat unaware |
| Telephone | 41% | 59% |
| Web | 63% | 36% |

| Question 2: Do you personally have an interest in your local school board and the decisions it makes? | | |
|--|------------|-----------|
| Survey type | Yes | No |
| Telephone | 43% | 57% |
| Web | 94% | 6% |

| Question 3: Do you know the name of the local school board in your area? | | |
|---|------------|-----------|
| Survey type | Yes | No |
| Telephone | 4% | 57% |
| Web | 82% | 12% |

| Question 4: Your local school board addresses education issues that are important to you. | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Survey type</i> | Strongly or somewhat agree | Strongly or somewhat disagree | Neutral |
| Telephone | 48% | 14% | 32% |
| Web | 53% | 32% | 15% |

| Question 5: Your local school board makes a difference in how education is provided in your community. | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Survey type</i> | Strongly or somewhat agree | Strongly or somewhat disagree | Neutral |
| Telephone | 66% | 10% | 23% |
| Web | 63% | 20% | 16% |

| Question 6: Your local school board does a good job of communicating with people about its role and responsibilities. | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Survey type</i> | Strongly or somewhat agree | Strongly or somewhat disagree | Neutral |
| Telephone | 38% | 29% | 28% |
| Web | 41% | 45% | 15% |

| Question 7: People in your community have opportunities to express opinions and provide input to the local school board, if they wish to. | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Survey type</i> | Strongly or somewhat agree | Strongly or somewhat disagree | Neutral |
| Telephone | 59% | 12% | 25% |
| Web | 55% | 32% | 13% |

| Question 8: People should be given more opportunities to express opinions and provide input to their local school board, if they wish to. | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Survey type</i> | Strongly or somewhat agree | Strongly or somewhat disagree | Neutral |
| Telephone | 73% | 7% | 19% |
| Web | 76% | 10% | 15% |

| Question 9: Do you feel you are involved or connected with your local school board in some way? | | |
|--|------------|-----------|
| <i>Survey type</i> | Yes | No |
| Telephone | 26% | 74% |
| Web | 55% | 45% |

| Question 10: If no, would you like to get more involved or connected with your local school board? | | |
|---|------------|-----------|
| <i>Survey type</i> | Yes | No |
| Telephone | 20% | 79% |
| Web | 50% | 49% |

| Question 11: What's preventing you from becoming more involved? | | | | |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|--------------|
| <i>Survey type</i> | No time/too busy | Don't know how | Nothing | Other |
| Telephone | 38% | 12% | 13% | 43% |
| Web | 26% | 26% | 18% | 36% |