



January 28, 2016

Last fall, we invited employees, parents, students and the general public to share their perspectives on public engagement at the Calgary Board of Education. The response was outstanding. We heard from more than 6,500 people.

Thank you for the time, thought and honesty you put into sharing your perspectives. Your opinions are important, and will guide us as we move forward.

Attached you will find a summary of what we heard. It identifies several areas where we can do better. These include everything from developing a well understood, fair and open engagement process to sharing the results of engagement activities with you. You were clear and we know what we have to do.

Doing things differently will require a great deal of commitment from all of us. My leadership team is fully behind this, and will be working with the rest of the organization in the coming months to find ways to improve.

I am encouraged by the support and care you have expressed for our students and our schools. It's clear from what we heard that parents feel good about the relationships they have with our schools, and that is something to celebrate.

We all have a part to play in the education of our young people. I hope you will continue to be involved in working with us. By working together, we can make a difference for our students and our community.

Sincerely,

David Stevenson  
Chief Superintendent of Schools

## Creating conditions for effective public engagement

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

January 26, 2016

#### BACKGROUND

The CBE is committed to involving people in decisions that affect them. To do this more effectively, a new system-wide approach to public engagement is being developed. The opinions of students, employees, parents and community members are important to gather and consider in the development process.

Stormy Lake Consulting was hired to lead the design, facilitation and analysis of data and information gathered through in-person sessions, interviews and online surveys.

This report summarizes what was learned through these opportunities for people to share their perspectives.

#### PERSPECTIVES WE GATHERED

From November to December 2015, we gathered more than 6,500 perspectives through:

- 19 group sessions involving approximately 300 people: four with students, one with members of the Council of School Councils, five with parents and the public (includes sessions with translation services), eight with employees, one with trustees
- 42 individual interviews with parents, community association members, CBE corporate and community partners, employees, public (conducted by Stormy Lake Consulting and members of the CBE Public Engagement Framework Committee)
- 14 school councils submitted notes from discussions they facilitated at their meetings to be included and considered in this report
- Two online surveys:
  - One for employees (2,596 responses): 57% ATA, 32% Staff Association, 7% CUPE, 4% Exempt, 1% Construction and Maintenance Trades Unions
  - One for parents, students and public (3,993 complete responses): 95% parents, 2% public, 2% students

#### SUMMARY

**Across all stakeholder groups consulted, there are five key highlights:**

- There are generally very few differences in experience or opinion between stakeholder groups (students, parents, employees and public). Where there are important differences amongst groups, it has been noted.
- Most participants voiced a strong desire for the CBE to improve its engagement practices, but they are skeptical that it will happen.
- Good engagement includes clearly defining the decision that needs input, creating the right opportunities for people to share their views, and closing the loop by sharing results and how input influenced the decision. The CBE is generally credited with providing good opportunities for input, but improvements are needed in communicating the purpose for engagement and closing the loop.
- School-based engagement has been the most effective in the past. Students, parents, employees and members of the public are most interested in topics related to students and student learning. As topics move further from the classroom and student, the less interest and satisfaction there is.
- Many participants said that improving engagement would require a culture change at the CBE.

## Opportunities for Improvement

These were the suggestions made by the majority of participants (those highest on the list will make the biggest positive impact):

1. Close the loop. Share the results of engagement with all stakeholder groups and help participants understand how their input influenced decisions and outcomes. And if their suggestions could not be implemented, explain why.
2. Make the engagement as relevant to learning and the classroom as possible.
3. Develop a fair and open engagement process.
4. Be inclusive. When applicable, encourage direct participation from as many stakeholder groups as possible. Consider providing more opportunities for the public to share their perspectives.
5. Keep participants informed throughout the whole engagement process.
6. Ensure people feel heard and valued. This involves listening to understand, valuing individual opinions and recognizing the contributions of participants.
7. Work closely with schools. Parents view teachers, principals and schools as the most effective ways to connect with the CBE. These connections are critical.
8. Provide multiple ways for people to learn about topics and share their opinions. This includes providing a balance of online and in-person opportunities to share perspectives. Each is worthwhile.
9. Simplify the location of information for employees.

## WHAT WE HEARD

**Amongst all stakeholders there is significant skepticism that current engagement is sincere.** Many believe that the decision has been made prior to the opportunity for input or feedback being provided.

“Either sincerely look for feedback and build it into the decision or don’t bother to ask for input. Consultation that does not truly affect a decision wastes everybody’s time.”

Parent

**But some are hopeful that we are changing our approach to engagement.**

“I love that you are looking for input from parents - please continue to do this!”

Parent

**School-based engagements have been the most effective in the past.** Parents feel connected to their child’s classroom, their teacher and their principal, but they do not feel a similar connection to the system. Most employees feel they have the opportunity to provide feedback and opinions within their school, Area or service unit, but that they do not have the same opportunities to share their perspectives on system-level decisions.

**When asked how satisfied they are with the ways they have been asked for their opinions and feedback in the past, 44 per cent of employees responded saying they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied.”** Exempt employees are significantly more satisfied with engagement than are other employee groups (ATA, Staff Association, CUPE and Construction and Maintenance Trades Unions).

**Those who have participated in public engagement initiatives indicate that the sessions and opportunities for input were reasonably effective; the majority feel that the CBE falls short in the early and later stages of engagement.**

Many employees indicate that how they are engaged is not of concern. What does concern them is that they are largely unaware of what happens to the feedback they provide and how it impacts decisions. Parents, students and the public express a similar concern.

The CBE needs to do a better job of defining the purpose of the engagement and improving the feedback loop. Members of the public do not feel the CBE encourages their involvement in decision-making and do not believe they have given the appropriate information to share their opinions. What isn't clearly communicated to participants are the following:

**Purpose of engagement**

- What is the decision to be made?
- How will the input be used?
- What factors influence decision-making?

**Closing the loop**

- Are the results of engagement shared with participants in a timely manner?
- Do participants know how their input was used in decision making?
- Are changes in process communicated along the way?

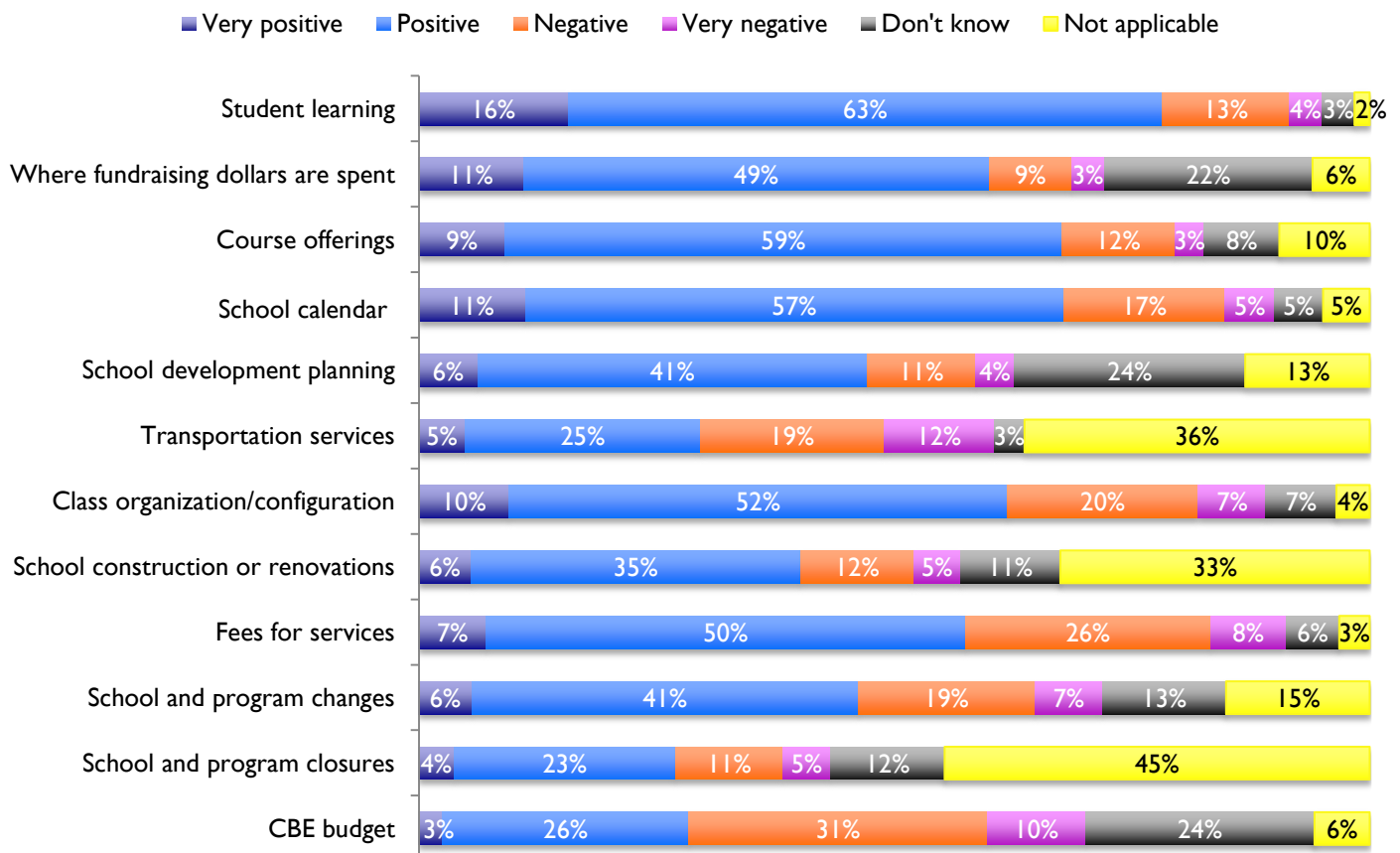
This has led to a common perception that the CBE does not consider the information provided by stakeholders in making decisions.

**In this process, it will be important for the CBE to continue to build consistencies between the schools and the system.** Parents and employees recognize inconsistencies in day-to-day operations across the system and from school to school. These inconsistencies impact effective engagement. If other matters are handled differently from school to school, it leaves people wondering how they can trust that engagement is consistent or that their participation will make a difference at a system level.

**Effective public engagement at the CBE means a change in culture not a change in process.** Most people who participated in in-person discussions and interviews indicated that implementing an effective system-wide approach to public engagement will require a significant culture change at the CBE.

**Experience with Specific Topics (parent, student, public survey: in order of most to least positive)**

On the survey, we asked participants to comment on their experience of a variety of topics.



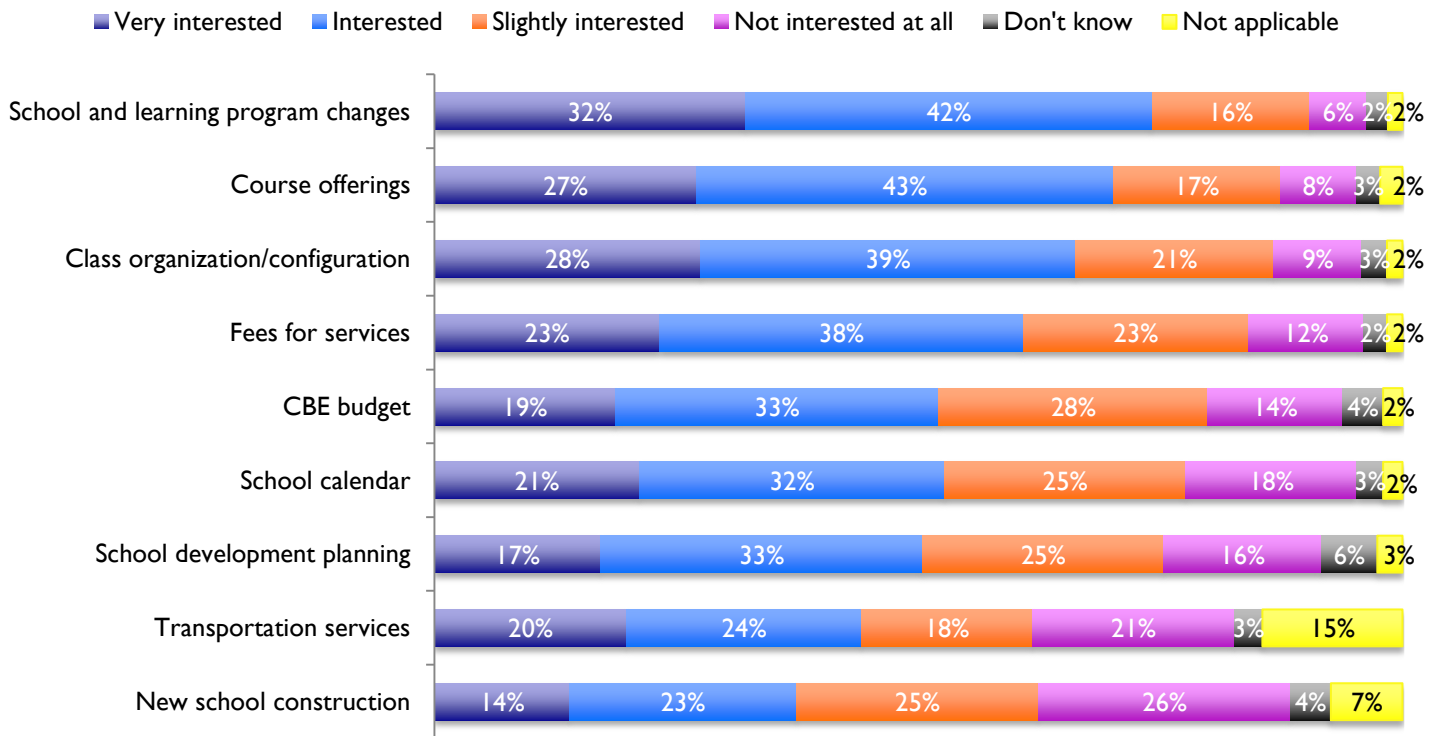
### Topics of Interest for Future Engagements

On the parent, student and public survey, participants were asked how interested they would be to engage on a variety of topics. **As you can see from the list below, as topics move further away from students and their learning, the less interested most people become in sharing their thoughts and opinions.** This is largely due to a perception that the CBE does not invite them to provide their thoughts on system-level decisions and, as a result, their thoughts and opinions will have little to no impact on those decisions.

“Anything that affects student learning conditions or directly impacts students in my classroom.”  
Employee

“I feel that most lines of communication between the CBE and parents tend to be one way. Parents are often informed but not really asked our opinions in a meaningful way.”  
Parent

Topics listed (parent, student, public survey: in order of greatest to lowest levels of interest):



### Principles of Engagement

Students, employees and the public were asked to comment on their desired principles of engagement. In addition to the word cloud, a list of key principles and a definition for each has been provided.



Possible Principles of Engagement:

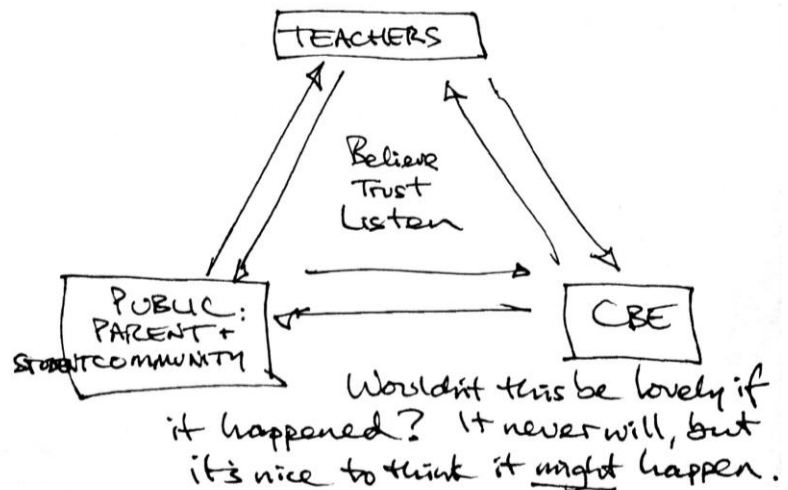
Feedback	Participants and stakeholders are able to see the input and in what ways it was used in decision-making.
Authentic	Genuine interest and willingness to consider the opinions of participants.
Timely	Conducted before a decision has been made. Feedback is provided in a timely manner.
Open	Genuine listening to participants, there are no pre-determined outcomes.
Clarity	Purpose of the consultation is clearly articulated.
Influence	An expectation that engagement will result in change.
Meaningful	The engagement is about an important topic and you are not engaged in less meaningful topics.
Simple	Issues to discuss are presented clearly and simply, using plain language rather than education jargon.
Objective	Listening without preconceptions or bias.
Consistent	All stakeholder groups get the same message in relation to a goal/topic.
Resourced	Adequate people and financial resources provided to conduct an effective engagement.
Two-way	Communication before, during and after the engagement.
Pro-active	Planned in advance of an issue rather than in response to an issue.
Interesting	The engagement topic and process is interesting and engaging to participants.
Accessible	Inclusive of all stakeholders, especially CLD.
Accountable	To the people who participated.
CBE values	Students come first, learning is our central purpose, public education serves the common good.
Holistic	Bring the big picture into the engagement and considers other related issues, doesn't just focus on one aspect of the issue.

Outcomes

In the in-person sessions we asked participants to describe the CBE’s best and worst possible outcomes regarding the CBE’s initiative to improve public engagement. Responses are outlined below.

Best outcomes for this engagement include:

- Give feedback and be heard
- Good cross-section of participants
- 100% engagement
- Consistent, interactive, timely, two-way communication
- Meaningful
- Parent engagement for betterment of their child makes for better outcomes for all
- Clear and consistent communications
- Engagement is used for major initiative
- Engagement is used across the system
- Summary of key stakeholder perspectives shared
- Impact of engagement is clear
- Gains trust of families
- More involvement from stakeholders
- Teachers feel they have a voice



Visual drawn by an employee at an in-person session.

Worst possible outcomes identified by participants in the in-person sessions:

- Status quo
- Nothing done well
- Hear nothing further
- Make it complicated
- Good plan, poorly implemented.
- They hire a consultant
- A belief that engaged parents are the problem parents
- Tokenism
- Resource drain and increased workload
- Engagement fatigue
- Public expectation they will be consulted on all or most issues
- We don't do anything different with the information collected.
- Alienates the quiet voices

“Adopt a culture of engagement where you account for the perspectives of those most directly impacted by your decisions...follow the process - do not change the game mid-stream - there are well defined processes (IAP2) that can be used but you have to actually apply the process to the planning of engagement and to the engagement itself. Do not cheap out on engagements. This work requires time, resources and people. ”

Employee

## DETAILED REPORTS

Detailed information on what different groups had to say about public engagement at the CBE is posted on the CBE website at [www.cbe.ab.ca/dialogue](http://www.cbe.ab.ca/dialogue) in the “Building a New Approach to Public Engagement” section. There are three reports, one for the in-person discussions and two others for the results of each online survey.

The full reports are being reviewed and considered in developing a new system-wide approach, also known as a “framework,” for public engagement.