



CREATING CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT

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Background

The CBE is committed to improving its public engagement practices. It's one of CBE's top priorities this year. The opinions of parents, students and the general public are important to gather and consider during this process.

Parents, students and the general public were asked about their satisfaction with past experiences, effective communication and engagement methods, topics that are important to them and how they would like to be consulted on decisions that affect them.

This input will help to develop a new system-wide approach to public engagement. This new approach will allow the CBE to do a better job of listening to and understanding people's views on decisions that affect them.

Method

19 in-person group discussions were held, engaging 300 students, parents & public, teachers and employees.

Students	4	
COSC	1	
Parents & Public	5	Includes culturally and linguistically diverse families
Employees	8	
Trustees	1	

42 individual interviews were conducted in-person and via telephone by Public Engagement Framework Committee members and Stormy Lake Consulting.

14 school councils submitted the results of their own discussions based on a discussion guide provided.

“Improve transparency so we actually know what types of decisions are in the process of being made. With more information and all of the facts it would be easier to form educated opinions around issues and explain how we might feel we would be affected.”

Parent

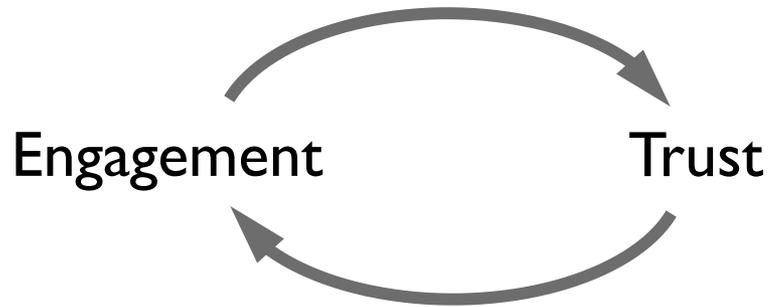
Fairness & equity

When people cannot evaluate whether a decision is fair, the process by which that decision is made is judged instead.

In an environment where decisions are made on very complex issues, CBE stakeholders are looking to evaluate the process. This is the transparency they seek.

This is also the opportunity for engagement to improve.

CURRENT CONTEXT



Engagement will build trust. But more trust is required to support engagement.

Overcoming skepticism

There is significant internal skepticism that current engagement is not sincere.

“We’re not really engaging employees. We’re just collecting words to support what has already been decided.”
Employee

“The CBE skews its surveys in order to get a certain type of response and ignores real information that might contradict what the top executives want to hear.”
Employee

Parents share this concern

“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

Seeds of hope

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

“Personally, I think what CBE is currently doing is great. I am grateful for the opportunity as an employee to share my voice and hopefully contribute to streamlining our practices and working better, and smarter together.”

Employee

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

Parent

Engagement = Communication + Involvement



The majority of CBE engagements have been confined to this end of the IAP2 spectrum.

Some excellent, localized examples of engagement at higher levels of the spectrum also were identified.

“I think the gathering of info is fine. It's what is done later that is the issue .” Parent

“It's difficult to determine the effectiveness of gathering opinions and feedback when we don't know if any action has occurred. To me effectiveness is not whether or not I was free share my opinions but rather did my opinions and feedback lead to any action.” Employee

3 stages of engagement

Employees and students conceptualize three stages of engagement:



The CBE is credited with doing the best job with the providing opportunities for input

Purpose of engagement

Purpose engagement describes the authentic intent of the process.

- What is the decision that needs to be made?
- Is the purpose of the engagement clearly and compellingly communicated?
- Is the way input will be used clear to potential participants?

Opportunity for input

Opportunity for input describes the engagement processes:

- Are the right people being engaged in the right ways?
- Are the engagements well-executed?

Closing the loop

Closing the loop describes the feedback cycle

- Are the results of the engagement shared with participants and stakeholders in a timely fashion?
- Is how the feedback was used clearly communicated? And if it was not used, why not?

The primary opportunity to improve engagement is to improve the feedback loop.

“We have to stick with the decision, we cannot waffle. We need to have confidence that we have made the right decision, be able to explain why, and then able to stand firm.”

Employee

Engagement or management

Many CBE employees describe issues of good engagement that are more accurately described as issues of good management:

- Breaking down silos
- Communication from managers and between departments
- Meaningful feedback on input into decisions
- Being involved in issues where you will be impacted

Classroom-centric

students



school



system



Parents, students,
and even the public, are most
concerned with what is most
relevant to the classroom.

“Most important is how changes impact students in the classroom.”
Parent

“There are too many initiatives without adequate feedback from front-line teachers.”
Employee

Need to be informed

Many employees, at all levels, are concerned that they lack the information necessary to support or lead engagement.

“Sometimes we don’t have all the information. You can’t engage with parents effectively without this kind of information.” Employee

And parents agree

“It doesn’t appear as though principals are being informed or consulted appropriately.” Parent

PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

Desired principles of engagement



Desired 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.

Desired principles of engagement

- 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.
- Consistency** 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.

Desired principles of engagement

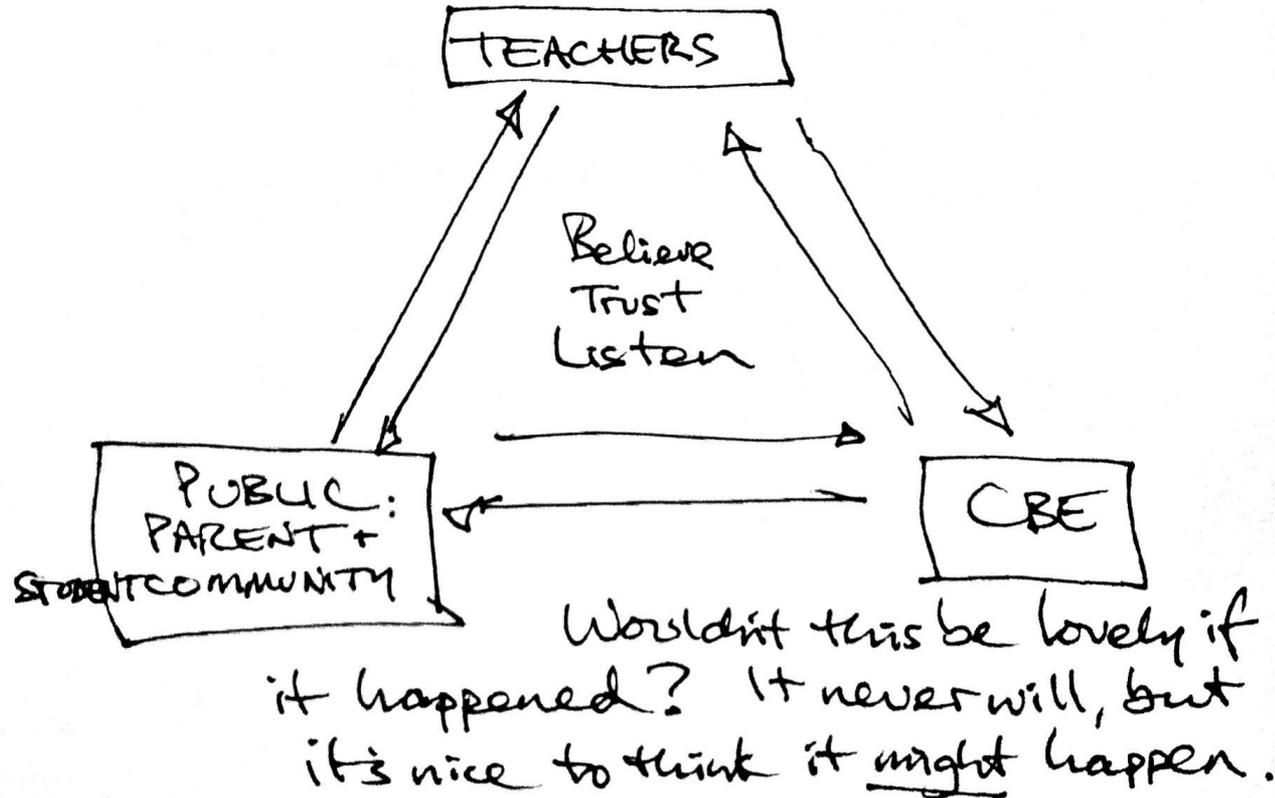
- Interesting** The engagement topic and process is interesting and engaging to participants.
- Accessible** Inclusive of all stakeholders and consider the diversity of our communities.
- Accountable** To the people who participated.
- CBE Values** Students come first, learning is our central purpose, public education serves the common good.
- Holistic** Bring the big picture into the engagement and consider other related issues, don't just focus on one aspect of the issue.

“Just because we talked about it doesn’t mean you listened to me.” Employee

“Listen to us when you do ask for our opinions rather than asking just for the sake of saying you consulted us.” Employee

BEST AND WORST OUTCOMES

Best outcome



Visual drawn by an employee at an in-person session

Best outcomes

- 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

Worst outcomes

- 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

CULTURE OR PROCESS?

“Public engagement is like a checkbox, we’re forced to do ‘public engagement’ rather than it being seen as an important part of the process.” Employee

“CBE has the capability to do all of these things. There needs to be buy-in from this culture for this to happen in a way the public will say is authentic. To really value what the public has to say.” Employee

Process Culture

A large majority of employees saw that a change in culture would be required to improve engagement.

The public agrees (for engagement outside the schools).

“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

“Since the new Chief Superintendent has come in,
it seems more transparent.” Employee

INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES

Students

Students want to be engaged in their learning and their school environment.

“I want to talk about changes that want to be made to my school.” Student

They are unaware of opportunities to be engaged.

“Make it so that students are aware that they can participate in sharing their opinions or that there are topics that they can contribute in. Many times students are simply not aware that they can share their ideas or where they can do so.” Student

Topics on which students would like to be engaged

Courses & the curriculum

- Extracurricular activities, changes in program and teaching methods (e.g. discovery learning), report cards

Classes

- Class size, scheduling, structure, calendar, length of the school year

Opinions of teachers

- Teacher performance

School environment

- Fundraising, sports, energy conservation, conditions of the fields, books in the library, grade integration, fun day

Employees

Some employee groups feel that the demands and schedule of their work make it difficult for them to participate in some engagement activities.

- It's important for the CBE to make reasonable efforts to ensure all employee groups are able to share their perspectives.

Principals have unique concerns about the mechanics of engagement (e.g., survey bias, special interest groups “hijacking” an issue, language barriers etc.). They also prefer face-to-face over surveying (better transfer of information), feel they lack the time to authentically engage parents and express a need for more timely and consistent system-wide communications.

Parents

Parents need to see an urgency to participate – if they can't connect it to them and their child, they won't engage.

Parents want the CBE to use the principals as a springboard to engage with their school more effectively – they are the ones who really know the climate.

CONSIDERATIONS

School council

School council has many of the characteristics of a successful engagement tool: access to the principal, focused on the school and the classroom, regularly scheduled, two-way dialogue.

“Opportunities to discuss CBE topics at school council meetings is great. It's an effective way to hear from parents, admin and teachers at once.”

Parent

But

“Parents have questions, but wouldn't come to School Council. They're worried about making a commitment of any kind.”

Employee

“School Council is too small of a group to be representative of the rest of the parent community.”

Employee

On-line surveys

Students, teachers and employees are all concerned about over-surveying:

- Too long
- Not relevant
- Too frequent
- Not used

“Tell Them From Me” is frequently cited by students as a survey that has little value.

Stakeholders have difficulty distinguishing Alberta Education surveys from CBE surveys.

Build consistency between schools and system

Parents and employees recognize inconsistencies in day-to-day operations across the system and from school to school.

The inconsistencies have a negative impact on engagement

- It's hard to know what the current situation is.
- If it is different from school-to-school, how do I trust that engagement is consistent?
- If schools are autonomous, how can engagement in an issue make a difference?

DISCUSSION