SASKATCHEWAN
School Boards
ASSOCIATION

# Public Engagement

## Module 15

Participate in this seminar to explore strategies for engaging parents and the community as partners in education. Module 15 workshop and resource materials include these important topics:

- ✓ The meaning of public engagement;

- ✓ The importance of public engagement;

- ✓ School division strategies to effectively engage the public as partners; and,

- ✓ The role of School Advisory Committees.

STEWARDSHIP  RELATIONSHIP

LEADERSHIP

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# **Contents**

# Introduction

This handbook is intended to provide a simple introduction to public engagement for school board members. The information offered in this handbook is very basic. For more detailed information refer to the publications listed in the bibliography at the end of this handbook or attend a seminar organized by the Saskatchewan School Boards Association. Check the Association's website (http://www. schoolboardsassociation.ca) for seminar details.

## Public Engagement

There's lots going on in Sunny Valley School Division:

- Mrs. Krause, the school board chairperson, is making a speech to the Chamber of Commerce. She talks about the importance of education in today's world and emphasizes that employers depend on the schools to develop an educated, technologically literate workforce.

- Parent and community volunteers are working in most of the schools in the division. They are doing arts and crafts activities with the kids, helping out at track meets, sewing costumes for school plays, publishing school newsletters, and doing dozens of other interesting and useful jobs.

- The school board is leading a public dialogue on community use of school facilities. The board is developing a policy on this topic and wants to involve the community. They held a series of public meetings to get people's ideas on the topic, wrote a first draft of the policy, and circulated the draft. Right now, the board is getting feedback on the contents of the draft. The next step is to write a second draft of the policy.

- A group of parents (six mothers, two grandmothers, two fathers) are gathered in the parents' room at the school for their weekly get-together. They chatted about their kids and enjoyed coffee and cookies. Right now they're having a discussion about what's normal behaviour for six- to eight-year-old kids. The local public health nurse is the resource person for their discussion.

These are all examples of public engagement. Public engagement occurs when the school board, the school staff, students, and members of the school community are working together, sharing ideas and information. They are participating in an ongoing dialogue for the benefit of students, families and the community as a whole.

- Public engagement is integral and fundamental to a school board's operations.  It is a way of doing business.

- Public engagement is broader than parental engagement.  It makes a special effort to reach groups not directly connected to the school system.

- Public engagement uses many different methods depending on the purpose – one size doesn't fit all.

- Public engagement is an ongoing dialogue among all members of a community for the benefit of students, families and community as a whole.

## Building Community

Public engagement is all about building community. It's about creating bonds between people and groups that enable them to feel connected, to share, and to pull together toward common goals.

Public engagement can contribute to:

- **Building a community of relationships** – The school system must create opportunities for stakeholders within the system to interact and build relationships.  When people get together in meetings, on the playground, or in school they start to know each other and feel comfortable working together.  They develop a community of relationships.

- **Building a community of minds** – The school system must create opportunities for conversation between the system and its stakeholders.  People won't support what they don't understand.  The more people learn about the school system, the more likely they are to support it.  When people share ideas, learn together and understand each other's principles and priorities, they develop a community of minds.

- **Building a community of memory** – The school system must come together for support and celebration.  Over time, these events become the nostalgic "good old days" – days that people can remember and talk about fondly.  When people have fun together in school and community events, and celebrate the achievements of students, teachers and the school system as a whole, they develop a community of memory.

## A Duty of Care

Schools have a duty to protect and care for children. They must keep children safe from dangers of all types, including physical and psychological harm, sexual predators, drug dealers, and abduction. Thus, school boards must balance the desire to open schools to the community with the need to care for children. Most schools establish procedures to create an appropriate balance. For example:

- All visitors are asked to report to the office;

- Strangers wandering in the school or playground are approached and questioned, and may be asked to leave;

- The police are called if a stranger appears suspicious;

- Processes are created to select and supervise school volunteers; and,

- Parents or others must have permission from the teacher and principal to observe in a classroom.

If in doubt, err on the side of caution. Every school board's first and foremost responsibility is to the students.

## Policy Leadership

A school board's job is to govern those aspects of the education system that, under legislation or through practice, fall under its jurisdiction. Most school boards do this through policy leadership. They develop policies describing the results they want to achieve, hold school division staff responsible for producing the desired results, and monitor progress to ensure the desired results are being achieved.

The school board is responsible for ensuring that procedures are established to meaningfully engage parents and the public in shared decision making and school support. Most boards will do this by developing policies specifying the results they want to achieve – that is the types of public engagement they want to see and the roles they want the public to play in decision making.

Each section of this handbook includes "What Do You Think Boxes?" which ask questions to stimulate thought and provoke discussion. Many of the questions in these boxes relate to policy leadership, and to the way that policy can be used to achieve desired results.

## Building Board Knowledge

*1. What events and activities do you organize to build a community of relationships? What might be added?*

*2. What are you doing to create a community of minds? What forums have you created for discussion of ideas and sharing of information? What might be added?*

*3. What opportunities have you created for people to come together and create shared memories? What might be added?*

*4. What steps have the schools in your school division taken to balance their duty to care for students with the desire to open schools to the community?*

*5. Does your school board presently have policies that address public engagement?*

# Reasons for Public Engagement

Society is changing in ways that make public engagement crucial if school boards are to serve their communities effectively.

- **Communities are increasingly diverse** – The small group of individuals that compromise a school board rarely reflects the full diversity of the community as a whole.

- **People are increasingly mobile** – The ongoing dialogue that public engagement generates is necessary to give a voice to our current school community – a school community that may differ greatly from that of only a few years ago.

- **Education is increasingly seen as a commodity** – With the public school system viewed as simply one "supplier." Private and home-schooling are readily available alternatives for families that are dissatisfied with the public system.

- **Educational expectations Are changing** – The Canadian School Boards Association has identified a number of goals and objectives for education. Two of these goals, in particular, underline the need for ongoing dialogue within our communities.

All governing bodies, including school boards, are facing community demands for greater accountability.

School boards used to be seen mostly as overseers and reviewers of the professional educators in their employ. Now they are expected to share responsibility for how well students and schools perform. School boards need to be active participants in the community. They can no longer stand apart from the community or assume that all decision-making responsibility rests with them.

- The nation as a whole has an interest in the education of children – and so the nation as a whole should have a voice.

- Canadian society as a whole must contribute to creating a learning culture, that is, society has a responsibility for education that accompanies its interest.

## Benefits of Public Engagement

Student achievement is at the centre and the heart of every school board's work. Students' academic achievement is very important, but achievement has many other dimensions as well. Achievement includes achieving a safe, orderly school environment that is conducive to learning; achieving equality of opportunity and of outcome for all students; and achieving the vision and goals of the board.

Public engagement is a process that helps school boards accomplish their most important goal – ensuring high levels of achievement for all students.

Public engagement has the potential to:

- **Increase support for education** – Public engagement increases community members' understanding of what's happening in their local schools and the education system generally.  With increased understanding comes increased support.  Remember – people won't support what they don't understand.

- **Raise student achievement** – When families are involved in their children's education, the children achieve more.  In addition, children whose families are actively involved in their schooling tend to have better behaviour and fewer discipline problems.  This is true regardless of the family's socioeconomic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' education level.

- **Increase awareness about the strong link between education and economic success** – Education is the key to success for the individual, our province and our country.  It is sometimes said that we live in a "knowledge economy" because knowledge is a very marketable commodity.  The best jobs go to people with high levels of education, and our province needs an educated, skilled workforce for prosperity.

- **Make indivduals and communities stronger** –  When individuals participate in discussion, decision making and action relating to education, they learn new skills and develop increased confidence.  They may gain experience speaking in public, chairing meetings, writing, and working with young people.  These skills benefit them as individuals and also make them stronger contributors to their community.

- **Involve people who are historically underrepresented in educational decision-making** – For most of Saskatchewan's history, Aboriginal people and poor people have been pushed to the sidelines.  They have had little or no say in how their children are educated or how the school system operates.  The result has been alienation and low student achievement.  Public engagement can include processes to involve these groups and to increase their participation in educational decision making.

- **Increase opportunities for public participation in education** – The public can participate in education in dozens of ways ranging from volunteering at school to helping in shaping educational decisions.  Generally, when people are involved in something and participate in making decisions that affect them, their sense of commitment increases.

# Overview of Public Engagement

Public engagement has many dimensions:

- The board member who lobbies for funds to improve school computers;

- The grandparent who leads the school choir;

- The collaboration that occurs between the school, the Friendship Centre and social workers when a family is having trouble;

- The family literacy program that meets once a week in the school library; or,

- The Local School Advisory Committee that makes many decisions about the school building and playground.

These are just a few dimensions of public engagement.

Public engagement involves everyone in the community – students, teachers, parents, grandparents, businesses, other organizations that work with youth, and the community at large. It includes information, conversation, sharing, decision making and action.

Public engagement also takes time and patience. The results are worth it, because public engagement has the potential to enhance student achievement and to strengthen the public's commitment to education.

In 1996, Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at John Hopkins University in the U.S. described six categories of school/parent/community involvement. These six categories can also be used to describe the various types of public engagement. They are:

- **Parenting** – When children feel safe, secure and cared for, they are more able to learn at schools. School boards can help families provide for their children's basic needs and strengthen families' parenting skills.

- **Communicating** – Two-way, positive communication between the home and the school is a way to promote student success. Students whose families are actively involved in their education demonstrate higher achievement and fewer behaviour problems. School boards are responsible for a special type of communication – advocacy. School boards speak up for education in their local communities. They tell everyone that education is important and lobby for increased resources when these are needed.

- **Volunteering** – Volunteers play important roles in schools. They can support and enrich the school program and provide positive role models for students.

- **Learning at Home** – Families are their children's first and most enduring teachers.  When families foster positive attitudes toward learning, read to their children and make homework a priority, children do better at school.  School boards can show parents how to promote learning at home and how to encourage their children to learn.

- **Decision-Making** – People feel a sense of belonging, ownership and commitment when they participate in decisions that affect them.  School boards can use several different methods to involve the public in decision making.  Local School Advisory Committees can offer advice to the board and assume responsibility for certain types of decisions.  Public dialogue is important when making major decisions or developing controversial policies.  Students also can participate in making decisions that affect them.

- **Collaborating with Community** – Schools are just one of the many community agencies that serve children and families.  When schools collaborate with other agencies, the result is a holistic approach to the needs of families and more effective use of scarce resources.  School$^{PLUS}$ provides a model and a framework that facilitates community collaboration.

Each of these different types of public engagement is described in more detail in the sections that follow.

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**Building Board Knowledge**

*1.  Identify one example of each type of public engagement underway in your school division.*

- *Parenting*

- *Communicating*

- *Volunteering*

- *Learning at Home*

- *Decision-Making*

- *Collaborating with Community*

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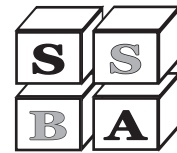
# Parenting

Parents are their children's first and most influential teachers. Children spend more time with their parents than they do with any teacher. Parents have a huge influence on their children's success in school and beyond. Yet despite this great potential, some parents feel inadequately prepared or overwhelmed by their very important role.

Parents may:

- Be poor and unable to provide basic necessities for their children;

- Not know how to build healthy parent-child relationships, because they themselves were not parented appropriately; or,

- Be overwhelmed by the responsibility of raising children, working or going to school, and maintaining a home.

When children's basic physical and psychological needs aren't met, their school work suffers. Hungry children cannot learn. Children who are constantly tired because of a chaotic home life miss most of what happens in class. Children who live with violence often act out at school.
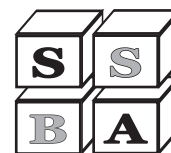
Some of today's parents need support to care for their children and to create healthy families. School systems can be an important source of support.

Schools can help families provide for their children's basic needs by offering breakfast and snack programs, organizing clothing exchanges and community kitchens.

Schools can strengthen families' parenting skills by creating parents' programs. Some schools have a family room equipped with a coffee pot and books and videos on parenting topics. Other schools offer parenting programs that feature informal socializing, snacks and discussions on topics of interest to parents. Topics might range from disciplining children, to budgeting, to having fun with your child.

Parents' programs benefit families and their children, but they also benefit the school because children come to class more able to learn. When parents become familiar with the school and its staff, they are more likely to be supportive of education and to play an active part in their children's learning.

## Building Board Knowledge

*1. What role do you think school boards should play in helping parents be better parents?*

*2. What would be the two most important components of school board policy on supporting parents?*

# Communicating

Communication is the foundation upon which all the other types of public engagement are built. Effective public education depends on good communication. Communication of one type or another is discussed in every section of this handbook.

This section describes two specific types of communication:

- Home-School Communication; and,

- Advocacy.

## Home-School Communication

The importance of communication between the school and the home is well known. Without communication, parental involvement – which is so vital for student success – does not occur.

Effective home-school communication:

- **Is Two-Way** – Families want to feel comfortable talking to school staff about their wishes for their child. They want to describe their children's strengths and weaknesses, their child's likes and dislikes. Parents know their own children better than anyone else. Communication should not consist only of staff "telling parents".

- **Acknowledges the Positive as Well as the Negative** – All too often, families only get a call from the school when their child is in trouble. School staff should make a point of calling families to acknowledge a child's strengths, talents and achievements. Consider implementing a policy that requires staff to make at least one positive call to families for each negative call.

- **Uses Several Different Methods** – Notes sent home with students often end up crumpled in a pocket or backpack and never reach their intended audience. Use personal phone calls, phone trees, school newsletters, posters and anything else that works to reach families.

*Notes*
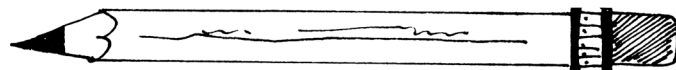
# Advocacy

Who advocates for education in your community? Who tells everyone that education is essential for success in today's job market? Who leads the cheering when students get high marks or complete a wonderful school project? Who vigorously lobbies the community when money is needed for a new school, better technology or enhanced programs?

The answer to all of these questions is the school board.

Advocating for education is an important part of the board's job and one of the responsibilities of individual board members.
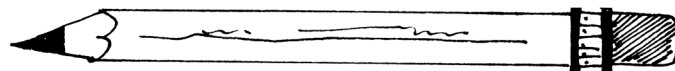
In many Saskatchewan communities, there is a well organized group of parents and sports enthusiasts who advocate for kids' hockey. They tell everyone about the importance of hockey.  They apply for grants and fundraise for their team or league.  Similarly, most communities include groups that advocate for the Humane Society or the Cancer Society.  They tell everyone about the important work their group does and aren't shy about fundraising.

When you believe in something, it's important to speak out, to tell others.

Advocacy is a special type of communication because it permeates everything you do as a board member.

Advocacy isn't a single event or a single activity.  It occurs in many different situations.  When you talk to service clubs and business groups, emphasize the importance of education for the individual and the community.  When you give out ribbons at the elementary track and field day, encourage the kids to focus on their studies and stay in school.  When a community in your school division needs a new school, develop a comprehensive plan to explain the benefits of a new school. Ask the local newspaper for a monthly school board column and fill it with facts and figures about the personal and economic benefits of education.  Include first-person accounts from people of all ages whose lives are better because of education.

**Notes**

## Building Board Knowledge

*1.  What measures has your board taken to ensure that home-school communication is two-way, positive, and uses a variety of methods? What would you like to see added?*

*2.  What have you personally done in the last year to advocate for education?*

*3.  How might your school board's work program be changed so it includes a strong advocacy component?*

*4.  What are the three most important things your board can do to advocate for education?*

# Volunteering

Every child has a right to a good education and every member of the community has a role to play in the schools.  Harnessing the time, energy and special abilities of community members can enrich student learning and foster the integration of school and community.

When we think of volunteers we often think of parents and grandparents.  Many other groups in the community are potential volunteers as well.  Retired folks with time and energy, people with specialized skills or those in interesting occupations – all can give what our students need – time, attention, new ideas, and new skills.

Volunteers can tutor children; lead arts, crafts, drama and music activities; help with field trips and sporting events; talk to students about their jobs, hobbies or travels.  They can also help in the school office, build and repair equipment, participate in recycling programs.  There are hundreds of ways volunteers can participate in school life.

Volunteers support teachers and enrich the school program.  They provide varied and positive role models for students.  They do not provide direct instruction in key subjects or evaluate students.

Some volunteer activities are ongoing, for example, a volunteer who comes in once a week to tell stories to the Grade1 class.  Other volunteer activities will be single events; for example, the RCMP constable who comes in once a year to tell the Grade 6 class about her job.

Local businesses can participate in the school program too.  Some ideas for business involvement include:

- School/business partnerships where businesses provide workplace tours, job shadowing or work experience opportunities for students.

- Career fairs where local businesses set up booths and displays. For example, the local bank might set up a display about careers in the banking industry; a beauty salon might present information about a career as a hair stylist or esthetician.

# Benefits of Volunteer Programs

Volunteer programs benefit:

- Students who learn new skills, get more knowledge and receive personalized attention from adults;

- Volunteers who gain self-confidence and new skills and who have the satisfaction that comes with making a significant and meaningful contribution;

- The school as a whole because the educational program is enriched by the contributions of volunteers and there are more hands to share the work; and,

- Communities because volunteer programs break down barriers between school and community, give community members a better understanding of what goes on in school, and more appreciation of the joys and challenges that teachers face every day.

## Protecting Students and Volunteers

Many school boards have a policy on volunteers. The policy identifies the types of activities that volunteers are responsible for. It directs school division staff to provide appropriate orientation for volunteers and to organize volunteer recognition events. Most importantly, most school board policies on volunteers define procedures that protect both students and volunteers. For example:

- Volunteers must fill out an application form, giving name, address and references. The application forms are kept on file in the office. Some large school boards require a police criminal records check along with the application form;

- The school principal is responsible for selecting the individuals who volunteer in the school;

- Volunteers are never alone with individual students. When volunteers work one-on-one with individual students, they work where other people are present; for example, at the back of a classroom, in the school library, or in a corner of the school office; and,

- The school division's insurance coverage protects volunteers, students and others when volunteers are participating in school activities.

**Building Board Knowledge**

*1. What tasks are volunteers presently performing in the schools of your division?*

*2. Can you think of additional ways volunteers might enrich the school program?*

*3. Does your board presently have a policy that addresses volunteering? If yes, how could this policy be strengthened or improved? If no, what features would you like to see in a policy on volunteering?*

# Learning at Home

Schools and families each play important roles in student learning. At school, students focus on specific skills and knowledge. They master long division, learn about the agricultural plants of Saskatchewan, practice reading and writing, and discover the history of Canada.

It is easier for students to learn in school if their families foster positive attitudes toward education, read and talk to their children, and create a structured environment that offers a time and place for homework.
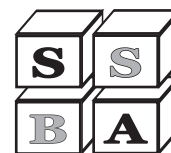
Most parents want to help their children learn, but some don't know how. Some parents lack literacy skills and so cannot read to their children. Others grew up in homes where learning was not valued and so don't know how to promote their own children's learning.

There's a lot that schools can do to teach parents how to support their children's learning. The school board's most important job is to ensure that all students achieve at high levels. Because families' involvement in their children's learning is strongly linked to achievement, activities that promote parental involvement in education also promote achievement.

A few ways that schools can involve families in their children's learning are listed below. In all of these activities it is important to emphasize that parents' role isn't to teach specific skills like long division, but rather to create an environment that promotes learning.

- **Family Literacy Programs** – Organize family literacy programs where parents and children learn together. In many family literacy programs, parents first practice reading a picture book aloud and then read it to their youngster. The local library may be an eager partner for a family literacy program.

- **Family Learning Nights** – Organize family learning nights that are attended by both parents and students. During these sessions, provide both adults and students with an overview of what students will be learning in different curriculum areas. Feature some hands-on learning activities that will be fun for both adults and kids.

- **Bingo** – Distribute a bingo-like card, with each box containing a parent activity that supports learning. Have families check each activity as they do it. Families that have checked all the activities on the card by the end of the year get a certificate and some kind of public recognition.

**Building Board Knowledge**

*1. What are the schools in your division doing to promote families' involvement in their children's learning?*

*2. What would be the two most important components in a school board policy on family involvement in learning?*

# Decision-Making

Everyone wants to have control over their lives. They want to have a say in decisions that affect them.  They want to have influence over what happens in their community.  When people participate in making a decision, they feel more ownership over the outcome and are more likely to be happy with the results.  Education, because it affects so many people, is an important area for shared decision-making.

This section has three parts:

- School Advisory Committees;

- Public Dialogue; and,

- Student Decision-Making.

The first two parts describe processes that can be used to involve teachers, families and the general public in decision-making.  The third part emphasizes the importance of giving students a say in decisions that affect them.

## District Boards of Trustees and Local School Advisory Committees

When making decisions, school boards often need input from established boards and committees that have a defined decision-making/advisory role.  Fortunately, two such bodies already exist in most school divisions.  District Boards of Trustees (often called Local Boards) and Local School Advisory Committees are defined in the legislation and can make an invaluable contribution when it comes to decision-making.

School Advisory Committees are key partners in engaging the public.  Members of the school board, individually or collectively – cannot possibly have their fingers on the pulse of every small community in the school division or every special interest group.  They cannot tell everyone in the division about the importance of education and the great job local schools are doing.

Boards need to create formal structures that will be their eyes, ears and voice in every corner of the school division.  District Boards of Trustees and Local School Advisory Committees are ideally suited for this role.  These two bodies can share responsibility for educational decision-making and be strong advocates for education.

## Sharing Responsibility for Decision-making

The duties and powers of the School Advisory Committees, as defined in The Education Act, 1995, are primarily advisory.  These bodies make recommendations to

the school board in certain specified areas and may assume other responsibilities with the approval of the board.

Ask Local Boards and School Advisory Committees for input when you are making decisions.  For example:

- · Do citizens consider a new school important enough to accept a tax increase?

- · What's more important – offering a wide range of programs in one large school or offering a limited range of programs in several small local schools?

Members of Local Boards and School Advisory Committees are in touch with their local communities and can tell you what people think about issues like these.

Delegate specific decisions to Local Boards and School Advisory Committees. For example, they might be responsible for decisions about the high school graduation or the school playground.  Often when these local bodies are given specific decision-making responsibilities by the school board, they are also given an appropriate budget to support their work.

It is important to assign meaningful roles to Local Boards and School Advisory Committees.  These groups are most effective when members feel they are making a difference – that their work matters.  If Local Boards and School Advisory Committees are seen only as fundraisers or as rubber stamps for the school board's decisions, they will be unable to contribute fully and it will be difficult to attract energetic, enthusiastic members.

Advocating for Education

The school board's job includes advocating for education – speaking up for education – telling everyone that education is the key to personal and economic success. Advocacy is a big and important job – a job that can be shared with School Advisory Committees.  The members of these bodies are usually respected members of their communities.  Other people will listen to them and take heed of what they say.  They can be a strong voice for education in their local communities.

What Do You Think?·        What are the roles and responsibilities of School Advisory Committees in your school division?·        Are these roles defined in policy or have they developed through long-term practice?·    How could the roles of School Advisory Committees be enhanced so these bodies make a more significant contribution to public engagement?

# Public Dialogue

Most board decisions are expressed in the form of a policy. However, the day on which a policy is passed is often the culmination of a long process of public dialogue. The more controversial a policy is, the more public involvement is appropriate.

The people who will always be affected by a policy should have input into its development. Although public involvement increases the time required for policy development and makes policy development more complex, it usually results in greater acceptance and implementation of the policy.

Fundamental issues that should be the subject of public dialogue include:

- Setting direction and establishing divisional priorities;

- Allocating resources;

- Introducing major new initiatives or projects;

- Improving student achievement; and

- Reporting outcomes or results in any of these areas.

An example:

- The Board of Education for Prairie Plains SD decided to establish a school system vision and goals for improvement. A process was developed to invite participation from major groups within the schools and community. Sixty people gathered with the board at a forum to discuss and share their visions, dreams and hopes for the school system. After the forum, key ideas were written down and circulated for feedback. The 60 participants were invited back to a second forum to validate and further refine the key ideas. The positive feedback from this inclusive process made implementation of the changes easy and uncomplicated.

The steps in developing a policy are:

1. **Identify the Stakeholders** – Stakeholder involvement has several advantages. It:

   - Ensures the policy development process is open and transparent;

   - Allows everyone who will be affected by the policy to express their opinions;

   - Builds a sense of commitment and shared ownership;

- Makes people affected by the policy aware of its existence; and

- Increases the knowledge base upon which the policy is built.

The composition of stakeholder groups varies depending on the policy being developed. Students, parents, teachers and school administrators have an interest in virtually all policies. When the policy addresses a narrow issue such as missed exams, these groups may be the only stakeholders. However, for most policies, there will be community stakeholders, such as First Nations and Métis groups, non-profit organizations, and community groups.

2. **Form a Working Group** – Development of school division policies is usually led by a small working group made up of one or two board members, a central office staff member or principal, a teacher, a parent and one or two older students. Sometimes a community representative will be on the team as well.

3. **Explain the Need for a Policy and Ask for Input** – Let all potential stakeholders know that the policy is being developed, explain the reasons why the policy is needed and ask for input. Some ideas for getting input include:

- Ask for input at school staff meetings, meetings of the SRC, meetings of local community groups.

- Ask School Advisory Committees to lead meetings in local communities to get a broad cross-section of opinion.

- Put information on the school division's website and structure the website so readers can enter their comments.

- Put a notice in school newsletters with a tear-off form for comments that can be returned to the school division.

During this process, write down the concerns and issues expressed by students, parents, teachers, community organizations, and other stakeholder groups.

4. **Learn from Other School Boards** – Other school boards may have developed similar policies, and you may be able to learn from them. Many school division policies are posted on the website of the Saskatchewan School Boards Association (www.schoolboardsassociatgion.ca).

5. **Write the First Draft of the Policy** – One person is usually delegated to write the first draft of the policy. This person might be a central office staff member, a community member, a teacher or principal, or a capable older student.

6. **Get More Input**

   - Distribute the first draft of the policy to students, teachers and all community stakeholders and ask for feedback.

   - Write a second draft of the policy incorporating comments received from stakeholders.  Circulate the second draft and ask for comments.

7. **Finalize the Policy** – Write a final draft of the policy and pass the policy at a board meeting.

8. **Implement the Policy** – The methods used to implement the policy will depend on the issue being addressed and the people affected.

## Student Decision-Making

When making schools more democratic institutions with closer connections to their community, don't forget about students.  Involve them whenever possible in decisions that affect them.  Give students meaningful options and real choices and abide by the decisions they make.  For example, students are more likely to observe a School Code of Conduct if they develop it themselves, than if it is laid on them by the teachers.

Use decision-making situations as opportunities to teach critical thinking skills.

For example:

- Teach students the decision-making process by encouraging them to collect information, develop criteria, identify options, and select the options that best match their criteria.

- Emphasize the importance of getting input from others when a group is making a decision that will affect the whole school.  Students can organize meetings, and conduct written or oral surveys to get others' opinions.

**Building Board Knowledge**
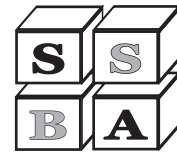
1. *What are the roles and responsibilities of School Advisory Committees in your school division?*

2. *Are these roles defined in policy or have they developed through long-term practice?*

3. *How could the roles of School Advisory Committees be enhanced so these bodies make a more significant contribution to public engagement?*

4. *How does your school board involve the public when you are making major decisions or developing policy?*

5. *Describe one decision made by your board where you are satisfied with the type and amount of public involvement.*

6. *Describe one decision made by your board where you would have liked to increase the amount of public involvement or implement a different type of public involvement.*

7. *What can your board do to promote students' involvement in decisions that affect them?*
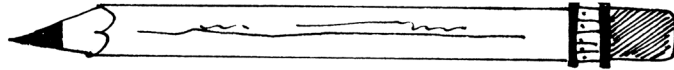
# Collaborating with Community

Schools are just one of many community organizations that work with children and their families.  First Nations and Métis organizations support families' cultural, social and economic needs.  Government agencies like Saskatchewan Health, Justice and Community Resources and Employment respond to a wide variety of needs.  Community sports, recreation and cultural groups offer young people  opportunities to develop skills and experience success.

When the school collaborates with other community agencies, student learning is enhanced and students and their families become stronger.

*Remember – Schools work best when school and community work together.*

*Notes*

# Public Engagement and School<sup>PLUS</sup>

School<sup>PLUS</sup> provides a model and a framework for school-community collaboration. School<sup>PLUS</sup> was developed by the Task Force on the Role of the School (1999-2000) to describe a new role for schools as centres of learning, support and community for the children and families they serve.

School<sup>PLUS</sup> recognizes that the role of the school has changed. Schools today have two primary functions:

- **To educate children and youth** – Nurturing the development of the whole child, intellectually, spiritually, socially, emotionally, and physically, and

- **To support service delivery** – Serving as centres for the delivery of appropriate social, health, recreation, culture, justice and other services to children and their families, as well as learning opportunities for adults.

School<sup>PLUS</sup> means that all schools adopt the community education philosophy and practice. They become open and inclusive, actively engaging family members and creating partnerships with community groups to support young people and their families.

## School Board Action

School boards can support community collaboration through policy leadership – by developing and implementing policies that support School<sup>PLUS</sup>. They can also advocate for any human and financial resources that might be needed for this endeavour.

School boards can also support community collaboration by forming partnerships with other governance and decision-making bodies in the community.

Regular conversations between the school board and the board of the local Friendship Centre will facilitate development of compatible policies and make it easier for each group to see the other's point of view. Regular meetings between the school board chair and the Regional Director of Saskatchewan Community Resources and Employment will provide an opportunity to develop consistent approaches to shared problems.

Public engagement:

- Is an ongoing dialogue among all members of a community for the benefit of students, families and the community as a whole;

- Is a way of doing school division business;

- Gains support for new programs, helps student academic success, and provides instructional resources;

- Requires adaptive leadership skills engage public and student participation in school decisions;

- Is about building community: opportunities; events; activities; community of minds; community of memory;

- Means surveys; decision-making; consensus; action; local school advisory committees; school advisory councils;

- Means protecting children to better assure their safety and security;

- Requires policy leadership;

- Involves facilitating programs for community: parenting; participation; leadership;

- Provides support for school and school division when they are threatened by outside forces; and,

- Requires outreach to First Nations and Métis people.

Research shows that where parents are engaged in the education of their children, the children succeed in school and proceed to post-secondary education programs.

School board work best when communities and schools work together. – student learning is enhanced and students and families become stronger.

***"The board is responsible for ensuring that procedures are established to meaningfully engage parents and public in shared decision making and school support."***

***"To effectively respond to children's needs, schools need the support of social services, health , justice and community agencies."***

## Building Board Knowledge

1. *What actions has your school board taken to implement the School^PLUS philosophy?*

2. *What local governance or decision-making groups (or individuals) has your board formed partnerships with?*

3. *What governance/decision-making groups or individuals are a priority for partnerships next year?*

# Strategies for Engagement

Public engagement uses many different methods – one size doesn't fit all. The methods used in any particular situation, depend on the purpose of the public engagement, the potential participants, and the human and financial resources available. Strategies for engaging the public are described in detail throughout this handbook and are summarized in the chart below.

| Strategy | Tips for Success | Role of Strategy |
|---|---|---|
| **School Advisory Committees** | • Give these bodies real and meaningful responsibilities and decision-making powers. They can be key players in public engagement processes. | • Get local input when developing policy and making important decisions.<br>• Advocate for education and spread the word that education is important. |
| **Family programs (e.g., parents' programs, family literacy programs, family leaning nights, etc.)** | • Keep the program informal – participants sit in a circle, enjoy coffee and snacks, have time for informal discussions. Be sure that guest speakers use a discussion format – not a lecture format.<br>• Ask participants about their interests and concerns, then select discussion topics and guest speakers that reflect these interests. | • Improve student learning by enhancing families' skills and/or enabling families to better support their children's learning at home.<br>• Create a stronger connection between families and the school. |
| **Focus groups** | • Organize small groups to focus on a single topic.<br>• Ensure that the composition of the groups is diverse to get a variety of perspectives.<br>• Keep discussion tightly focused on the topic at hand. | • Help school boards understand the issues relating to a topic from a variety of perspectives.<br>• Help establish agenda priorities for a larger, more comprehensive public dialogue/consultation. |
| **Partnerships with other organizations that work with children and families** | • Form relationships with community groups and Aboriginal organizations as well as government agencies. | • Enhance student achievement by responding to students' social, health and economic needs, so they are more able to learn.<br>• Implement the School$^{PLUS}$ philosophy.<br>• Strengthen the connection between school and community. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Phone calls to students' families** | • Be warm, friendly and, most of all, be patient. | • Provide positive information as well as negative information about students.<br>• Inform families about upcoming school events, public meetings, etc.<br>• Invite families to participate in family programs of various types. |
| **Polling and surveying** | • Hire a professional survey company or ask a class of high school students to organize a survey as a class project.<br>• Remember that a survey is only as good as the questions it includes and that many people don't respond to surveys. | • Provide an overview of public perspectives at a particular point in time.<br>• Follow up on or complement other public engagement activities. |
| **Presentations to service clubs, business groups, other community groups** | • Provide concrete data about the effect that education has on income.<br>• A school or community librarian can find this information on Statistics Canada's website. | • Advocate for education, emphasizing the importance of education for personal and career success, and Saskatchewan's need for a skilled, educated workforce. |
| **Print and electronic communications** | • Use low cost media like school newsletters and websites, public service announcements on radio and TV, posters, school board column in local newspaper.<br>• Include the name and number of a person to whom citizens may direct their questions or concerns.<br>• Combine with personal contact, as some people don't read printed material. | • Keep people informed about specific events and issues including school board meetings and public meetings.<br>• Provide an ongoing link with schools and the school board, thereby increasing the sense of community and belonging.<br>• Provide a focus for informal community dialogue on education issues. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Public dialogue/ consultation** | • Organize a series of public meetings with stakeholders to explain the issue and ask for opinion.<br>• Summarize comments in written form and give back to stakeholders, ask for more feedback. | • Get public participation and input when making major decisions and developing important policies.<br>• Build consensus in a community.<br>• Give participants a sense of ownership in educational decision-making. |
| **Regular school board meetings** | • Publicize the fact that all board meetings are open to the public.<br>• Invite a specific group to attend each meeting – groups might include students, service clubs, Aboriginal organizations, business groups, etc.<br>• Include a half-hour discussion period at the end of the meeting so guests can ask questions about meeting events. | • Increase the public's awareness of the school board's work and of specific issues facing the board. |
| **Volunteers in the schools** | • Give volunteers tasks that reflect their interests and skills.<br>• Implement policies and procedures that protect both students and volunteers. | • Enrich and enhance the school program.<br>• Strengthen the connection between school and community. |

## Notes
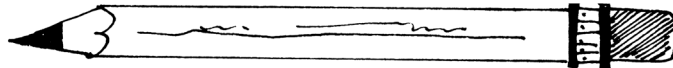
# Effective Public Engagement

Effective public engagement:

- Is used wisely and does not replace decision making by the school boards and professional educators who have been elected or hired to run the schools. Rather it informs decision making by boards and educators; and,

- Is not a tool for selling reforms to the public. The end result must not be predetermined; the outcomes must flow from the dialogue generated.

## Public Engagement Involves the Right People

Effective public engagement:

- Targets all segments of the community for involvement. Cultural or linguistic differences are not allowed to be barriers to participation, nor are age, educational background, or socioeconomic status; and,

- Ensures that teachers and students play active roles. Teachers and students have a first-hand perspective on the issues facing schools. Students have a similar perspective, and will be directly affected by decisions made. They need to be included in all discussions.

## Public Engagement Takes the Right Attitude

Effective public engagement:

- Takes time – time to build trust, time to overcome preconceptions and pessimism, and time to show results. Over time, with ample opportunity for genuine, constructive dialogue, these things will happen.

- Cannot be achieved in isolation. School boards have resources and expertise available to them. When they share their resources and expertise with the broader community, both the school system and the community become stronger.

*Notes*
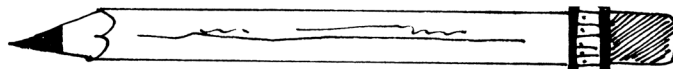
**Building Board Knowledge**
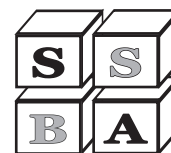
*1. Describe a school system with ideal public engagement.*

*2. How does your school division resemble the ideal?  How does it differ from the ideal?*

*3. What steps can you take to move your school division closer to ideal public engagement?*

# **Reflection**

Three key ideas from this module are:

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My questions:

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|  | **Ideas I want to learn more about:** | **Ideas for my board to consider:** |
|---|---|---|
| **To be an effective trustee:** |  |  |
| **To be an effective board:** |  |  |

**My Personal Plan of Action**

In order to strengthen the governance of our board of education, I make a commitment to:

| State the Area You Want to Improve | I Commit Myself to the Following | When Will I Do This? | How Will I Know I Have Been Successful |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

# For More Information

**Local School Advisory Committees**

School-Level Governance Working Group.  (1996).  *School councils:  The Saskatchewan vision*.  Research Centre Report #96-131.  Regina, SK:  Author.
(http://www.schoolboardsassociation.ca/research/governance/96-13.htm)

- This document represents the final report of the School-Level Governance Working Group, a body established by the Saskatchewan School Trustees Association in fall 1996.  The purpose of this group was to take a critical look at the concept of school-level governance and to develop a consensus view of what this concept means for Saskatchewan

**Parent and Community Involvement in Education**

Epstein, J. L. et al.  (1997).  *School, family, and community partnerships. Your handbook for action*.  Thousand Oaks, CA:  Corwin Press.

- Epstein identifies six different types of school, family and community partnerships and gives many ideas for implementing each type.  This book is a key resource because it provided a new way of thinking about parent and community involvement.

National PTA.  (2003). *Building successful partnerships:  A guide for developing parent and family involvement programs*.  Bloomington, IN:  Author.

- This book addresses Epstein's six types of partnerships from a parent's point of view.  It includes many ideas that will be of interest to board members and teachers as well.

Saskatchewan Learning. (2002).  *Working together toward School^PLUS:  Parent and community partnerships in education:  Handbook 2002*.  Regina, SK:  Author.
(http://aquilo.sasked.gov.sk.ca/k/pecs/pp/pub.html)

- This handbook begins with a description of Epstein's six types of parent/ community/ school partnerships.  It provides ideas for activities that schools, school boards and school division administration can undertake to foster each type of partnership.  It provides several examples of workshop plans and school board policies relating to partnerships.

## Policy Leadership

McDonough, K. (2002). *A pathway to effective board policy*. Research Centre
　　　Report #02-09. Regina, SK: Saskatchewan School Boards Association
(http://www.schoolboardsassociation.ca/research/governance/02-09.htm)

- This policy governance framework will help boards move from traditional
  hands-on management to a policy leadership approach.

Thompson, L. (1999). *Policy leadership*. Research Centre Report #99-09.
　　　Regina, SK: Saskatchewan School Boards Association.
(http://www.schoolboardsassociation.ca/research/governance/99-09.htm)

- Describes policy leadership by boards of education and outlines the process
  of developing, implementing and monitoring policies.

## Public Engagement

*Community engagement.* (n.d.). Ottawa, ON: Canadian School Boards
　　　Association, Board Learning Centre.
(http://www.cepan.ca/blc/modules/CE/flash/Ce100.htm)

- A slide presentation that provides an overview of public engagement. Writ-
  ten specifically for school board members.

## School^PLUS

Government of Saskatchewan. (2003). *School^PLUS: Well-being and educational
　　　success for all children and youth.* Regina, SK: Author. (Brochure)
(http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/k/pecs/splus/SchoolPlus_web.ppt)

- Gives a brief overview of School^PLUS and what it means for schools and
  communities.

Government of Saskatchewan. (2002). *Securing Saskatchewan's future*.
　　　Regina, SK: Author.
(http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/k/pecs/spip/docs/roleofsch/provresp.pdf)

- The Government of Saskatchewan's endorsement of the School^PLUS philoso-
  phy.

Task Force and Public Dialogue on the Role of the School. (2001). *School^PLUS:
　　　A vision for children and youth: Toward new school, community and
　　　human service partnerships in Saskatchewan.* Regina, SK.
(http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/k/pecs/spip/docs/roleofsch/roleofsch.pdf)

- The final report of the Role of the School Task Force which describes, in
  detail, the School^PLUS vision and philosophy.

**Volunteering**

*San Francisco School Volunteers.*  (2003).  San Francisco, CA:  Author.
(http://www.sfsv.org/index.html)

- This website describes the volunteer program organized by one very large school division.