

Getting it Right: Community Engagement in PSD

By Tim Monds, Kelly Wilkins, Emilie Keane and Claire Jonsson.

It's not often that a school division can score a big win resolving tough issues around boundaries, redirecting attendance areas and in making changes that potentially impact a few hundred students and their families.

Pressure was on and in some cases it could be described as the "perfect storm". With a past experience that failed to leave parents satisfied with both outcome and process, Trustees and Senior Administration in Parkland School Division (PSD) were determined to find a way to ensure 1) that the best decisions were made by involving parents and community and 2) that stakeholders felt valued and heard in the process. We needed to get it right this time.

Parkland School Division is home to 21 schools and several alternative sites serving 9700 students in both rural and urban communities directly west of Edmonton. Changing demographics has resulted in utilization issues; experiencing significant over-crowding in schools in Spruce Grove and Stony Plain where growth is prevalent and the challenges of declining enrolment in other schools. Aged attendance boundaries did not adequately address the current numbers and resources are finite.

Supported with the expertise of an outside consultant, Hugh Skinner (Stantec Consulting), Parkland School Division Trustees and Senior Administration developed and implemented a comprehensive System Review. The goal was to find some short term solutions and to develop a long term planning framework while building trust and credibility along the way.

The task began by clarifying and articulating the purpose of the review and by establishing the process and timeline. One of the key elements of Phase One was the development of Planning Principles that would be used to create and evaluate options. During the Phase One Open Houses (held in 3 schools across the Division) the public was engaged by

reviewing a series of storyboards that shared the Planning Principles and detailed information about attendance area boundaries, school enrolment data trends, school facility restraints and expansion possibilities. Trustees and staff were available to speak with the public. No solutions were proposed in Phase One. Public feedback was solicited in a variety of ways, verbally, comment sheets and emails. All feedback was collated, shared and reviewed with all Trustees, Senior Administration and the consultant in order to determine next steps.

Throughout the System Review there was continual communication, notifying stakeholders of progress. Every possible opportunity was leveraged to inform and engage as many people as possible—School Administration meetings, School Council meetings, Council of School Council meetings, Municipal Partners and Student Advisory Committee.

Phase Two Open Houses (again there were 3 held across the Division) fed back to the public what was heard from them in Phase One and then provided proposed actions for public review and comment.

Public feedback confirmed that the Board heard the right messages. For instance, "keep families together and enable grandfathering with any boundary changes, limit cross-boundary students at overcrowded schools and rural students attend rural schools when urban schools are overcrowded". Feedback from Phase Two influenced the Board's decisions including boundary changes.

Every detail was considered as the changes were implemented. Personalized letters were sent to every affected family.

The messy work is never done and the pressure is still on but the sentiment is so different. As we continue to tackle the remaining issues, there is a more confident and unified commitment and a much stronger sense that we will collectively continue to make the best decisions for students.

Our solution—focused process did much more than resolve some of our utilization and demographic pressures. It went a long way in walking the talk; demonstrating that we value open and transparent communication and in modeling that we are a learning organization. And finally, on the value of deepening the trust with stakeholders ... priceless. Our school communities including parents, staff and Trustees would agree that the win was truly a win-win! ■

Tim Monds, Kelly Wilkins, Emilie Keane and Claire Jonsson are all a part of the Senior Administration team of Parkland School Division.



This photo is of Board Chair, Richard Gilchrist addressing a group of agencies and organizations who have had a positive impact on students through their involvement with local schools (May 2011).