

**DATE:** September 24, 2019

**TO:** Board of Trustees

**FROM:** Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

**SUBJECT:** Strategic Plan Update: Family Engagement

**ORIGINATOR:** Nancy Petersen, Managing Director, Strategic District Supports

**RESOURCE**

**STAFF:** Clarice Anderson, Marnie Beaudoin, Diana Brunton, Kim Holowatuk, Terry Korte, Cathy MacDonald, Karen Mills, Natalie Prytuluk, Will Rice, Rick Stiles-Oldring, Soleil Surette, Greg Wondga

---

**ISSUE**

The purpose of this Strategic Plan Update report is to provide the Board of Trustees with an overview of the opportunities for families to be involved in their child's education focusing on the redesign of SchoolZone.

**BACKGROUND**

In 2018, Edmonton Public Schools formally reaffirmed the District Strategic Plan for the 2018-2022 term. The District Strategic Plan has three priority areas with supporting goals and outcomes. The plan provides common direction and alignment between the work of the Board of Trustees, the Superintendent of Schools and District staff. The plan serves as the foundation for a District culture of evidence-based decision making, assurance and accountability.

To demonstrate the District's commitment to transparency and accountability, Strategic Plan Update reports were introduced in 2016–2017 as an extension of the Annual Education Results Report (AERR). The reports are intended to provide the Board of Trustees with detailed progress towards the goals and outcomes of our Strategic Plan.

**CURRENT SITUATION**

This Strategic Plan Update report highlights the work of schools to engage with families in activities that support building welcoming, inclusive, safe and caring learning environments, efforts at the central level that enhance family and student experience within the District and is in direct response to Priority 3 Goal 1 of the 2018-2022 District Strategic Plan for the District to enhance public education through communication, engagement and partnership: families as partners.

**KEY POINTS**

This Strategic Plan Update report provides the Board of Trustees with an overview of work in support of family engagement.

**ATTACHMENTS and APPENDICES**

ATTACHMENT I Strategic Plan Update: Family Engagement

NP:mh



# Strategic Plan Update:

## Family Engagement

September 24, 2019

# INTRODUCTION

---

This report provides the Board of Trustees with an update on work undertaken in support of Priority 3 Goal 1 of the District's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan: *Enhance public education through communication, engagement and partnerships: Families as partners.*

The importance of family involvement in students' education is well documented (Epstein 1994, Epstein et al 2018, Henderson and Mapp 2002, Laroque, Kleiman and Darling 2011). It is also one of the six key areas critical to student achievement identified in the OECD report, *Promising Practices in Supporting Success for Indigenous Students* (2017). The research recognizes that family engagement can lead to greater student success in areas such as: better social skills, better attendance, higher test scores and improved behaviour (Epstein 1994, Epstein 2018, Henderson and Mapp, OECD). Family engagement is part of a continuum of relationship building that ranges from "parental involvement with school to parental engagement with children's learning" (Goodall and Montgomery 2014). Activities along this continuum can include: the various ways in which schools/teachers and families communicate, families providing meaningful input about programming, to families engaging their children in extracurricular learning opportunities.

The District's desired outcome for Priority 3 Goal 1 is to provide families with a variety of opportunities to be involved in their child's education, including possibilities beyond the daily classroom and school interactions, recognizing that families play an important role in shaping the way their children view learning and are able to successfully participate in their learning. Priority 3 Goal 1 reflects Outcome Three in Alberta Education's 2018-2021 Business Plan: *Alberta's education system respects diversity and promotes inclusion*, which is accomplished "through effective and meaningful collaboration with parents and partners to meet education needs of children and students" (Alberta Education).

Schools work to engage with families in meaningful, deliberate activities that support building welcoming, inclusive, safe and caring learning environments. There are also many complementary efforts undertaken at a central level, with a system-wide impact, that enhance family and student experience within the District. The main focus of this report will be on one such effort, the redesign and August 2018 launch of the District's new SchoolZone. The report will also briefly highlight family engagement sessions regarding infrastructure, program planning and policy development; family responses to the District Feedback Survey; the District's engagement of families and community members through the establishment of advisory committees; the role of School Councils; celebration and recognition of families; and accountability reporting.

*Schools that work alongside parents as partners  
achieve gains in student well-being, participation,  
engagement and achievement.*

*p.14. OECD, 2017*

# SCHOOLZONE

---

SchoolZone is the main digital tool for connecting District schools, teachers, families and students. It provides secure access to school and student information such as homework, attendance records and progress reports. It can be used to share Trustee, District and school level news and information. Families use it to pay fees, pre-enrol and access the yellow bus tracking service *Where is My Bus?* Its core purpose is to enable effective communication between home and school. SchoolZone was first launched in 2005 and in 2015 a comprehensive review was initiated to engage stakeholders in dialogue about how SchoolZone was being used and to envision its use in the future.

## SCHOOLZONE REVIEW

The review began with an assessment of the scope and impact of operating SchoolZone on District Technology, which identified the need for more research into how SchoolZone was being used by schools and families. Further data was collected through interviews, focus groups, analytic data, reviews of alternative products and a satisfaction survey of families, staff and students.

The survey solicited feedback on how SchoolZone was being used, what features were most valuable and what areas needed improvement. Uptake by stakeholders was very good, with 1,600 families providing feedback over the course of the review phase.

The review process identified four key areas for improvement:

- Mobile device functionality
- Features that promote consistent experiences across schools and classrooms
- Notification systems that better serve all stakeholders
- Integration with other District apps, especially G-Suite for education. G-Suite is a set of collaboration tools, software and products developed by Google, such as: Gmail, Calendar, Drive, Docs, Sites, etc.

Based on these results and the review of possible alternative software, a redesign of SchoolZone was recommended and a committee was struck to guide this work. Beginning in 2017-2018 the new SchoolZone platform was initially piloted in the McNally catchment and then expanded twice to include the W.P. Wagner and Lillian Osborne catchments. In total, over 50,000 users participated in the pilot. The process was very iterative, with features being identified and incorporated during the design and pilot process based on ongoing stakeholder feedback. Additionally an ongoing family perspective was important; as such, responses from families were solicited through surveys at two different points during the pilot.

An onboarding plan based on the pilot process was created for the full scale release across all District schools. Families and students were made aware of the coming changes beginning in June 2018 through a District-wide communication plan, which included posts to the old SchoolZone, email, social media, posters and presentations for school council meetings, as well as Facebook advertising. Full launch of the new SchoolZone occurred on August 20, 2018. The roll out went very smoothly with only a small increase in technology service calls related to SchoolZone.

Five hundred and fifty-eight stakeholders (staff, students and families) participated in the post-upgrade satisfaction survey, which was available for two weeks at the end of June 2019. Overall results from this survey, completed by 353 families, indicated they were satisfied with the SchoolZone upgrade.

## NEW FEATURES

When looking at the four areas identified for improvement in the initial review process, mobile device functionality, a more consistent appearance and an improved notification system were of primary interest to families. The following is an overview of the work done to support improvement in each of these three areas.

### MOBILE DEVICE FUNCTIONALITY

A desire for an improved mobile experience was expressed by all respondent groups and appeared throughout the data. Suggestions for improved mobile device functionality included:

- Easier navigation on mobile devices.
- Access to the full feature set of SchoolZone on smartphones.
- Better scaling of content to fit smaller screens.

Following the upgrades, families were the most positive respondent group about ease of use of SchoolZone on mobile devices at 90 per cent, while the overall score for all respondents was 84 per cent.

### CONSISTENT APPEARANCE AND CONTENT

In the pre-upgrade satisfaction survey, 41 per cent of families requested more consistency in the content and appearance of SchoolZone. The upgrade included a number of changes to the interface and appearance that ensured a more common experience for users, such as new content notification displays within SchoolZone. Other specific improvements suggested and implemented for the interface included:




- Less scrolling.
- Less clutter.

As this project was highly iterative, the interface was updated several times adding new features such as quick links based on feedback received during the pilot. In the post-upgrade user satisfaction survey, 95 per cent of families were positive about the consistency in appearance of SchoolZone, indicating that the work done to improve the interface was successful.

### NOTIFICATIONS

Changes to notifications were one of the most significant targets in the redesign. In the old SchoolZone, email notifications provided no details on what content had been added or updated and once in SchoolZone it was not easy for the user to identify what was updated or what was new content. Notifications were improved in two significant ways in the redesign. Email notifications now provide more details about the subject and new information is more clearly identified in SchoolZone.

#### Family Post-Upgrade Satisfaction Survey

- 92%  about changes to email notifications
- 93%  emails help identify new content
- 92%  onscreen notifications are effective

#### *Email notifications*

Improvements to email notifications included subject content, and student, teacher and class identification within the body of the email; as well as a combined family email capability, which families had identified as a top suggestion for improvement.

#### *Notification centre*

New items on SchoolZone are now identified by a **New** icon and users are able to see the number and location of unread updates. In the old SchoolZone none of these were consistently identified.

The new SchoolZone is also more accessible and compatible than the old version, which did not work well with mobile browsers, screen reader programs and text or audio browsers. For example, families can now use screen readers and link to translation software directly to translate the site, greatly increasing accessibility.

## ADDITIONAL FULL SCALE DEVELOPMENTS

There were several additional features, not part of the original scope of the redesign project, completed during and after the pilot that provided further enhanced functionality in SchoolZone. These included:

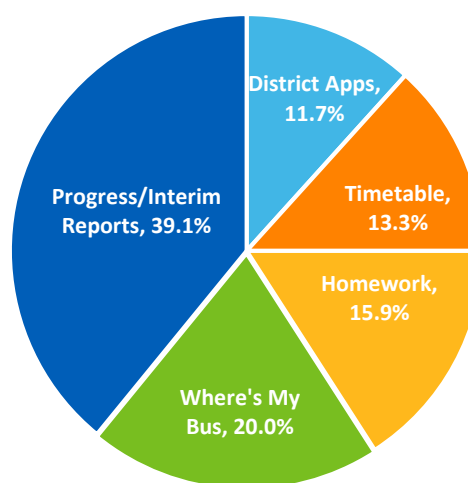
- Online versions of the School Information Correction and FOIP forms.
- Trustee News channel, which provides Trustees with a place to post information relevant to their wards.
- A feature that allows schools to house their customized Student Rights and Responsibilities and School Assessment Plan documents within SchoolZone.

## WHAT THE DATA TELLS

It is difficult to compare usage data from the old and new SchoolZone as the new interface and notification systems have been significantly streamlined, resulting in changes to the way usage is tracked and possibly to how families may access SchoolZone. These two factors make it irrelevant to compare before and after usage rates.

SchoolZone is used by teachers, schools, the District and Trustees to communicate with families. Use of SchoolZone varies across schools as does uptake by families. Figure 1 represents a breakdown of stakeholder use from the 2018-2019 school year, excluding news/calendar which is the default page that users are directed to once they log in. Ninety-four percent of family respondents to the post-upgrade survey found SchoolZone at least somewhat easy to use, compared to 80 per cent of the families that responded to the pre-upgrade satisfaction survey.

Figure 1. Top Five SchoolZone Pages in 2018-19



### 2018-2019 SchoolZone Quick Facts

- Over 9 million sessions
- More than 35 million page views
- 23,000+ news items posted from school offices
- 210,000+ items posted by teachers
  - 49% News
  - 42% Homework
  - 9% Class Resources
- Over 76,000 active family accounts for 101,865 students
- 55% of logins occur on a mobile device
- 93% of families selected SchoolZone as one of the ways they keep informed about Edmonton Public Schools in the District Feedback Survey

## OTHER FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES

### FAMILY/COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS

Infrastructure engaged families and community on a variety of topics over the course of the 2018-2019 school year; through 17 public meetings with an attendance of over 1,200 stakeholders. These meetings covered a number of District initiatives, such as: new school design visioning and concept sharing, alternative programs and transportation and attendance areas. Additionally, stakeholders were able to share their feedback online and over 1,000 people engaged with the District this way. The feedback gathered from families helped inform decisions regarding the design of new schools, the placement of alternative programs and the redrawing of attendance areas.

Family perspective is important in the development of Board policies and administrative regulations. Over 100 families and community members provided in-person feedback in eight sessions on three policies: Board Policy HAA.BP First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education; Board Policy GGAJ.BP Early Years; and Board Policy GGAB.BP Multicultural Education. As well, over 150 stakeholders responded to Board Policy DK.BP District Technology and Board Policy HAA.BP First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education policy drafts through online surveys. This feedback from families helped to shape the final draft of Board Policy HAA.BP First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education that was passed on June 11, 2019; and continues to support the Trustee Policy Review Committee in the development of Board Policy GGAJ.BP Early Years, Board Policy GGAB.BP Multicultural Education and Board Policy DK.BP District Technology.

This past fall the Board of Trustees also reached out to families around setting priority areas of focus within the Strategic Plan. Through focus group conversations and an online survey families had the opportunity to share with the Board which areas of the Strategic Plan they thought were most critical to the success of children. This feedback was combined with that of staff and students to help the Board prioritize their work over the next four years.

### DISTRICT FEEDBACK SURVEY - FAMILY VOICES SUMMARY

The District Feedback Survey (DFS) serves as a tool for stakeholders - students, staff, families and community members - to provide feedback to the District and schools around a broad range of areas relative to high quality teaching and learning.

The third annual DFS experienced another year of participant growth with 5,183 family responses, an increase of 33.8 per cent since the initial launch in 2016-2017. There has also been an increase in the percentage of family survey respondents choosing to answer positively to the questions about self-identification of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit<sup>1</sup> or identifying as being English language learners. This most recent percentage of parental identification more closely reflects the demographic profile of students in the District.

Family identification in DFS	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017
Identify child as status/non-status First Nations, Métis, or Inuit.	<b>5.6% (n=289)</b>	4.4% (n=189)	3.7% (n=142)
Child's first language is not English.	<b>24.5% (n=1,270)</b>	15.7% (n=677)	14.0% (n=542)

Responses regarding family engagement in the DFS demonstrate that families are generally satisfied with their ability to communicate with the school about their child. There was a significant increase in family satisfaction regarding ongoing information about their child's progress, though this may be partially due to the rewording of the DFS survey question. For an overview of DFS question enhancements please refer to footnotes 1-3.

<sup>1</sup> A change in wording of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit identification question occurred in 2018-2019 from *My child identifies as Status Indian/First Nations, Non-Status Indian/First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (Optional)* to *I identify my child as Status Indian/First Nations, Non-Status Indian/First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (Optional)*.



2018-2019 Questions	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17
I have adequate opportunities to communicate with my child's teacher	90.1	88.6	87.4
I am comfortable contacting my child's school about an issue or concern <sup>2</sup>	88.8	90.2	88.5
The ongoing information I receive from my child's school tells me about their progress <sup>3</sup>	84.2	77.5	75.4
The information I receive about my child's learning at school helps me to support my child	83.5	82.5	82.1

## ROLE OF ADVISORY COMMITTEES AND COUNCILS

The District values the voice and perspective of its stakeholders and has a variety of ways to engage and seek feedback around key or strategic areas. One means of engaging with a targeted group of stakeholders over an extended period of time for continued support and shared perspective, is to form an advisory committee or council. The following groups are two examples of advisory groups currently active in the District whose efforts support our work to engage with families in a meaningful and productive way:

### INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PARENT AND COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The advisory committee is made up of 10 members (five parent and five community members) and two District representatives. The work of the committee helps strengthen inclusive education in the District by:

- Enhancing how the District's Board policies and administrative regulations supporting inclusive education are put into practice.
- Providing information and advice to District administrators.
- Working to bring Alberta Education's [Principles of Inclusive Education](#) to life in classrooms.

### FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, AND INUIT EXTERNAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

The External Advisory Council is made up of a variety of organizations that collaborate with the District to support First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and their families. The role of the advisory council is to:

- Provide feedback on resources that the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit unit have created, including resources to support schools working with families.
- Receive updates on District initiatives (e.g. *Exploring Early Learning & Family Engagement* project with Enoch).
- Provide updates on what their organizations are working on in relation to education.

Organizations that have participated since January 2018 include:

- Alberta School Councils
- Bent Arrow
- Canadian Native Friendship Centre
- Centre for Family Literacy
- City of Edmonton
- Grant MacEwan University
- NAIT
- NorQuest College
- University of Alberta
- Yellowhead Tribal College

<sup>2</sup> Previous years' question: *I am comfortable contacting my child's school about an issue or concern with my child's educational experience.*

<sup>3</sup> Previous years' question: *The ongoing information I receive between progress reports tells me if my child is being successful in school.*



## SCHOOL COUNCILS

*School councils are structured groups of parents, principals, teachers, secondary students and community representatives who work together to effectively support and enhance student learning. They provide a means for members of the school community to consult with and provide advice to the principal and the school board.* (School Council Resource Guide, 2007)

In support of the District's Cornerstone Value of equity, the Board of Trustees pays the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) membership fees for all District school councils, ensuring the potential barrier of a fee is removed and all school communities are on equal footing to establish a school council. As well, every year the District hosts Alberta School Councils' Association training sessions for school councils. Last year, 78 School Council members from 51 different schools attended the fall training. ASCA also provided 49 workshops at 29 schools and connected with 93 District schools through email/phone.

Beyond the formal structure of the school council, each school community has its own way of connecting with and building relationships with the families it serves. Examples of these efforts include, but are not limited to:

- Drop-in morning coffee and muffins with the principal to support informal conversations and foster positive working relationships.
- Family dinners as part of key evenings like family-teacher conferences; these dinners often remove logistical barriers and enable more families to participate in these learning focused conversations.
- Encouraging opportunities for families to volunteer in the school community.

## CELEBRATION AND RECOGNITION

The role of families is important and the Board of Trustees hosts specific events to recognize the contributions of families and celebrate with them the success of their children. Some of these special events include:

### NIGHT OF MUSIC

This annual evening at the Jubilee Auditorium showcases the music programming across the District and provides students with the unique opportunity to perform in a professional venue in front of approximately 2,500 audience members. Typically between 600 and 1,000 students participate and their families are invited to share in this wonderful celebration of music.

### DISTRICT RECOGNITION PROGRAM

The District annually recognizes outstanding contributions from parents, community members, students and staff through the District Recognition program. Recipients are acknowledged in three categories: service, merit and team. Over the past five years the District has recognized 374 family and community members for their unique efforts in support of schools, students and learning.

### VOLUNTEER AND COMMUNITY RECOGNITION

On May 30 and 31, 2019, the Board of Trustees held a volunteer recognition event at the Royal Alberta Museum. Trustees hosted over 750 individuals over the two nights, to personally thank them for their volunteer contributions and donations to the District. Many of these volunteers were parents or caregivers whose children attend a District school. This event enabled the Board to extend their sincere appreciation for the time and effort volunteers give to schools across the District.

Many schools also have their own special way of recognizing and celebrating the work of family volunteers within their school community.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

In support of the District's Cornerstone Value of accountability, results and plans - at both the school and District levels - are shared and discussed through a variety of avenues. Through this cycle of planning and reporting there are key opportunities to engage with families to either seek their input around planning and the best use of resources or to share data, information and results relevant to the success of students. These opportunities include the following and are shared through a variety of means (SchoolZone, EPSB.CA, public Board meetings and school council meetings):

- Annual Budget Planning Process
- Annual Results Review conversations
- District and school level Provincial Achievement Test results
- Central Plans in support of schools and the District's overall operational Budget
- The Annual Education Results Report (AERR) and Strategic Plan update reports

## NEXT STEPS

---

SchoolZone will remain a critical tool to support communication with families. The work to iteratively improve the experience of SchoolZone will continue, with a focus on continued improvements to the mobile experience and a pilot to explore how families can reset their SchoolZone passwords via email.

This fall SchoolZone served as the platform for the launch of the District's Anytime Help Anywhere (AHA) videos. AHA is a series of junior high online learning videos designed to help parents/guardians support the learning of their children outside of regular school hours. These videos were developed by Edmonton Public Schools' teachers and principals to target concepts that are foundational learning for junior high students. AHA videos are currently available for Mathematics, English Language Arts, Social Studies and Science. Although these videos were designed to support junior high students, they may also be useful for students in Grades 4 through 12.

Having positive working relationships with families is critical to student success. The District will continue to prioritize engaging with families around their child's learning and seeking family input to help inform key decisions. Family voice will be essential in the coming months as the District navigates new expectations stemming from the *Education Act*, enacted in September 2019, and works to make the most efficient and effective use of educational resources.

## REFERENCES

- Alberta Education. [Business Plan 2018-2021](#). Retrieved Aug 21, 2019.
- Epstein, J. L. (1994) Theory to practice: Schools and family partnerships lead to school improvement and student success. In C. L. Fagnano and B. Z. Werber (Eds.), *School, family, and community interaction: A view from the firing lines* (pp 39-52). Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Sheldon, S. B., et al. (2018). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Goodall, J., & Montgomery, C. (2014). Parental involvement to parental engagement: A continuum....
- Henderson, A., and Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Larocque, M., Kleiman, I., and Darling S. M. (2011). Parental Involvement: The missing link in school achievement. *Preventing school failure: Alternative education for children and youth*, 55(3), 115-122.
- OECD (2017). *Promising Practices in Supporting Success for Indigenous Students*. OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264279421-en>.
- School Council Resource Guide. <https://www.albertaschoolcouncils.ca/public/download/documents/40732>. Retrieved September 10, 2019.