



Advisory

The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) is an advisory and consultative organization composed of the CEOs of each of the 72 District School Boards in Ontario; Public, Catholic and French Language.

Building trust is dependent on building positive relationships with people inside and outside the school – employees, parents, and business and community leaders.

“Canadians are searching for certainty in our public institutions... we want evidence that our public schools are delivering on the promise of substantive learning gains for all kids.”

Halbert, J. and Kaser, L.
Public Confidence from the Classroom
Out.
[see references]

Building Confidence in Public Education

Why build confidence in public education?

There is a complementary relationship between effective schools and public confidence in education. Student learning, parent satisfaction, and community support for schools are interdependent. Parents and communities expect excellent schools focused on student learning and achievement. When parents and community members believe that the school's successes and achievements are consistent with their expectations, they demonstrate high levels of confidence and support for school programs, and this support is an essential component in increasing student achievement and closing achievement gaps.

Students are more likely to be motivated, earn higher grades, have better behaviour and social skills, and continue their education when parents are actively engaged in supporting their children.

Because education has a vital role in our society, the successes and failures of schools are scrutinized with a critical eye and are reported widely. Polls and surveys publicize their findings and analyses regularly. Politicians, parents, media, commentators, organizations, and think tanks express their views on how well schools are fulfilling their mandate and on what improvements are needed.

Boards that communicate openly and frequently to all stakeholders, operate in an open and transparent manner, and value positive and supportive relationships, have higher levels of public confidence. Involvement of parents is an important strategy for building and sustaining public confidence. When parents are engaged, schools are more effective and student learning increases.

What does the Ministry of Education say about building confidence in public education?

Education Act:

s. 169.1 (1) “Every board shall, (a) promote student achievement and well-being; (b) ensure effective stewardship of the board's resources; (c) deliver effective and appropriate education programs to its pupils...”

s. 169.1 (4) “Every board shall take steps to, (a) bring the plan [multi-year plan aimed at achieving the goals referred to in 169.1 (1) above] to the attention of supporters and employees of the board; and (b) report to supporters and employees of the board about progress in implementing the plan...”

A recent survey reported that 42% of people get information about schools from other people (12% word of mouth, 14% teachers, and 16% family); 28% newspapers; 19% TV; 4% internet; 2% radio; and 1% political leaders.

Significantly, since 42% of respondents got their information from other people, leaders need to consider the role that employees and others play in word of mouth communications.

Building Public Confidence in Urban Schools: It Begins Inside the District. p. 1 [see references]

References:

Best practices in public engagement. Alberta School Boards Association. 2009 www.asba.ab.ca/files/pdf/best_practices_report.pdf

Building Public Confidence in Urban Schools: It Begins Inside the District. Council of the Great City Schools. Washington. 2009-10 http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/4/Building_Public_confidence.pdf

“Building Public Support for America’s Public Schools”. Charlotte Williams. Jan. 14, 2011 review of Jamie Vollmer’s *Schools Cannot Do It Alone: Building Public Support for America’s Public Schools.* 2010. <http://www.learningfirst.org/building-public-support-america-s-public-schools>

Don’t Count Us Out. Slide Presentation. Washington State University. Public Agenda. Oct. 2011. <http://www.slideshare.net/WSU/dont-count-us-out-presentation-public-agenda-october-2011>

s. 169.1 (5) “Every board shall, (a) effectively use the resources entrusted to it; (b) use the resources entrusted to it for the purposes of delivering effective and appropriate education; and (c) manage the resources entrusted to it in a manner that upholds public confidence.”

Regulations:

Ontario Regulation 612/00—School Councils and Parent Involvement Committees:

Reg. 612/00, s. 2. (1) “The purpose of school councils is, through the active participation of parents, to improve pupil achievement and to enhance the accountability of the education system to parents.” This regulation requires all schools to form a school council. School councils can provide views on current and future board policies and guidelines. School councils also provide input into school and board improvement plans.

Reg. 612/00, s. 27. (1) “The purpose of a parent involvement committee is to support, encourage and enhance parent engagement at the board level in order to improve student achievement and well-being.” Boards are mandated to establish a parent involvement committee. The parent involvement committee creates a direct link between the director and district school board and school councils.

Ministry of Education Resources:

- *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education.* This document states the three educational priorities of the government:
 1. high levels of student achievement;
 2. reduced gaps in student achievement; and
 3. increased public confidence in publicly funded education. (p. 4)

Reach Every Student also states, “Public confidence is key to creating communities that value learning and support the investment and social commitment needed to maintain our publicly funded schools...High levels of satisfaction and confidence in our schools are central to establishing strong community-school partnerships and keeping the focus and energy of the education sector on improving support for student learning.” *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education.* 2008. p. 10 [see references]

- *Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools.* This document formalizes the Ministry’s commitment to give parents a greater voice in education and recognizes the need to promote “specific parent involvement practices that are known to positively influence student learning and achievement”. (p. 6) Sidebars throughout the document highlight examples of exemplary parent engagement programs. *Parents in Partnership.* [see references]

What Supervisory officers should be aware of and consider in building public confidence:

Supervisory officers, as role models and leaders for the system, implement actions and behaviours which build public confidence. They develop board plans which outline measures to increase student achievement and well-being, and include strategies to maintain and increase confidence in public education. These strategies ideally focus on engagement, partnerships and relationships, accountability, transparency, and communications. Supporting school councils and parent involvement committees will also nurture a culture of positive engagement and will sustain confidence in schools and the system. Efforts to build public confidence must be woven into all aspects of school and board administration, student learning, and parent/community interaction.

What are the important practices for effectiveness?

- clear evidence of student achievement through transparent and accountable practices;
- meaningful partnerships and positive relationships with educators; and
- communication of relevant and current information in a timely and consistent manner.

Parents want schools with purposes and goals consistent with their own interests, which focus on student achievement and their children's learning. They want to be involved and have a voice in the education of their children.

A review of the literature on building public confidence details three important components that lead to increased public confidence:

1. *Engagement/Partnerships/Relationships* [see references]

- "...citizen engagement values the right of citizens to have an informed say in the decisions that affect their lives." *Handbook on Citizen Engagement*. Canadian Policy Research Networks. p. 4
- "Many of the best examples of public engagement at the school jurisdiction level are in fact planned, consistent, open, two-way *conversations* with all the stakeholders in public education, sometimes including some degree of power sharing for key decisions. They are not one-time events, nor simply good public relations or opportunities for comment. ...Further, board members and educators are much more likely to win public support to carry out their agendas if people know what their schools are attempting and why." *Best practices in public engagement*. Alberta School Boards Association. p. 3
- Jamie Vollmer proposes that educators reach out to the community using two tracks: a formal track that focuses on established community groups, and an informal one that takes place through everyday interactions. Vollmer suggests that educators attend community meetings instead of inviting community members to the board office or schools. This shows that educators care enough to reach out, and ensures reasonable numbers of participants. It also prevents the discussion from being high jacked by one or two people as school meetings often are, "because group members keep the conversation in check and within their normal meeting time limits". "Building Public Support for America's Public Schools". Review of Jamie Vollmer's book, *Schools Cannot Do It Alone*, by Charlotte Williams. p. 1
- The lessons that educators have learned as they increase public engagement:
 - Board leadership is essential to initiate and maintain engagement.
 - Time, patience, and effort are necessary to determine the most effective ways to engage different stakeholders.
 - The value of listening to and acting on the public's input is essential to the slow and sometimes difficult process of building trust.
 - Leadership to initiate the process of engagement is more important than understanding the process.
 - Research indicates that the "how-to" comes from engaging teachers and staff, parents and community in different ways.
 - Meaningful relationships are essential and are founded on active listening, sharing information, building partnerships, and finding common ground. *School Administrator*, September 1999, No. 8—an issue featuring articles on public engagement

2. *Accountability/Transparency* [see references]

- "Canadians ...want a greater role in accountability, not only holding others to account, but by actively contributing to decisions. Citizen engagement is not merely an input to, or a product of strengthened accountability, but a form of accountability in its own

Handbook on Citizen Engagement: Beyond Consultation. Canadian Policy Research Networks. Amanda Sheedy. 2008
http://dspace.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10214/3133/Sheedy_Handbook_on_Citizen_Engagement_Beyond_Consultation_complete.pdf?sequence=5

Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools. 2010
<http://www.cpco.on.ca/ResourceLibrary/Ministry/ParentEng.pdf>

Public Confidence from the Classroom Out. J. Halbert and L. Kaser. Presented at UBC Research Symposium, March 23, 2002.
<http://www.bcssa.org/topics/Halber-Kaser.UBC.publicon.pdf>

Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education. Ontario Ministry of Education. 2008
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/energize/energize.pdf>

Restoring Citizen Trust – The Heart of Accountability. Canadian Policy Research Networks. CPRN Policy Brief. No. 5, March 2006
www.cprn.ca/documents/42564_en.pdf

The School Administrator. Sept. 1999. No. 8, Vol. 56. Article by J. Arnett, "From Public Enragement to Engagement".
<http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=14622>

The School Administrator. Sept. 1999. No. 8, Vol. 56. Article by J. Kimpton and J. Conside, "The Tough Sledding of District-Led Engagement".
<http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=14614>

High levels of open, meaningful dialogue establish trust, respect, goodwill, and confidence in schools.

Involving Stakeholders

Through engagement, leaders are better able to understand how the public views a school's performance; what the concerns of parents might be; and build collegial support for improvement. Specific tools and strategies used to engage the public can take many forms. However, the most effective results are obtained when stakeholders are encouraged to become actively and meaningfully involved.



right. ...Improved accountability won't happen without transparency. ...Transparency means the public has easily accessible, understandable and meaningful information that makes clear what is being achieved for society with public funds and where the gaps are." *Restoring Citizen Trust – The Heart of Accountability*, p. 2

- A university study found that for the public, accountability means:
 - behaving more responsibly at every level;
 - ensuring fairness;
 - acting honourably;
 - listening to the public;
 - responding to people's concerns with respect and courtesy; and
 - accepting the consequences and responsibility for one's actions.*Don't Count Us Out*. Slide Presentation. Washington State University
- The following actions lead to improved accountability and transparency:
 - bringing attention to achievements as well as challenges;
 - improving understanding of issues and needs through open and honest dialogue;
 - welcoming community members and parents into the schools so they can observe firsthand what happens in schools;
 - sustaining a commitment to improvement;
 - developing open relationships with the public where diverse opinions and constructive criticism are accepted with respect and given consideration;
 - ensuring strong and effective administrative and management practices;
 - maintaining the highest standard of ethical behaviour and conduct; and
 - ensuring that achievement data, decision-making processes, business practices, and relevant information are highly visible, easily accessible, and open to discussion.

3. Communication Plan

- Effective communication fosters relationships and builds confidence. It informs the public on data, policies, decisions, and the current state of schools' achievement, successes, strengths and weaknesses. Leaders understand that all board employees have an important role in building public confidence and trust, and ensure that staff members are provided with the most recent information. Leaders ensure that a clearly-articulated and well-executed communications plan is in place. This comprehensive plan:
 - incorporates effective public, community, and media relations strategies;
 - considers internal communications as well as external communications;
 - reflects that communication is not the sole responsibility of an individual department, but of all employees;
 - develops strong relationships with the media to foster balanced and accurate reporting;
 - connects with all community members;
 - gathers community perceptions using feedback mechanisms; and
 - includes a process to determine the effectiveness of the plan and whether desired outcomes are achieved.

If as a supervisory officer, I have concerns and need assistance, what should I do?

- Review concerns with your senior leadership team
- Speak with knowledgeable colleagues who have significant experience in building public confidence in education
- Contact the Ministry of Education's Regional Office or the Parent Engagement Office
- Contact the Council of Ontario Directors of Education