

Good morning. I could talk to you for hours about Parents as Partners, but I will keep it brief. It certainly is a subject for which I have an incredible amount of passion. I want to give you a bit of a background on me, though, so you have a better understanding of where I am coming from.

I grew up in Sherwood Park, attending Woodbridge Farms, Clover Bar and then Sal Comp. I started at Woodbridge the year it opened; a brand new community full of eager parents. Throughout the 1980s, it would have one of the strongest parent associations. My mother chaired it for a number of years. She was very involved in the formation of the Strathcona County Committee of School Advisory Committees, the predecessor to our current Committee of School Councils. She led the charge to change the direction of the committee to a parent focused one from a Board focused one. She was also invited to speak to various government committees when they were gathering feedback on the new implementation of mandatory school councils in the new School Act in the 1990s. To say that I had an incredible role model, and grew up in a home with a passion for parent voice and engagement would be an understatement.

I am a teacher by trade and graduated in 1996, in the midst of all the education cuts. I taught for two years in Cadotte Lake, on a reserve about an hour outside of Peace River. Then I taught another 7 years for Edmonton Public Schools, at John D Bracco in Clareview.

I have three children in grades 2, 6 and 8. I chair the school councils at Westboro and Sherwood Heights, as well as COSC. I am also a provincial director for the Alberta School Councils Association. I really do see education as a partnership. I believe strongly that when we work together, students win.

I wanted to start with what Parents as Partners means to me. I have high expectations of engagement. My youngest daughter has a hearing loss and is on an ISP. I want to help write it. I have strategies that we use at home, as well as, one we have learned through trial and error in previous years. I have expert knowledge in the subject area of Nathalie and I want to be actively involved in her education. I want to sit down with the teacher and discuss her ISP, and what we should include, as well as discuss the struggles that keep me up at night. I don't want an envelope home with a completed ISP and a request for a signature.

I want to have the conversations: at a classroom, school and division level. I want to be recognized for the perspective I bring to the table and thought of as an equal. I want my input to be weighed and considered and I want to have the follow up after a decision has been made to close the loop. I want to walk alongside you as a valued partner.

This past spring, our Board Chair, Trina Boymook, and I were invited to present on the benefits of a positive relationship between parents, school councils, trustees and boards at the Alberta School Councils Association Annual Conference. I believe that a lot of the benefits we shared are the same as for the Board Outcome Parents as Partners.

A huge success in terms of partnership is the new elementary report card. No one was satisfied with the old outcome based/illuminate report cards. I'd even venture to say that most people hated them. While I wasn't around when they were introduced in EIPS (we actually had something very similar in Edmonton Public when I was teaching and I hated them as a teacher;

as a parent in EIPS, I loathed them and actually spoke out against them at every opportunity). We knew we needed something new and I credit EIPS with recognizing the importance of creating a committee of trusted partners to work through the process. Imagine the struggles if we were missing a group. Would we have had the buy in if teachers weren't involved? Would we be reporting on what parents really want to know if parents weren't included? Would we have leadership buy in if principals were omitted? I sat on this committee and was passionate about the work. I remember one debate about whether to include reporting on basic math; it got pretty heated. Ultimately, fundamental math was added based on that debate, but also survey results from parents which expressed their desire to know how their children were doing on adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing. This was just one example of how we built a report card everyone could be proud of and I commend EIPS for truly embracing Parents as Partners with the new elementary report cards.

Not everything is as big as a new report card, and so how do we embrace this partnership idea on a day to day basis? The biggest way is to utilize our school councils and to have conversations. We also need to develop relationships and a sense of community where everyone is welcome and feels safe. We work hard to build that safe, caring, respectful and welcoming environment in our classrooms and amongst our staff, but we need to ensure our schools feel that way to parents too. Have we designed an environment and built procedures which facilitate building community. Do parents feel welcome and safe to share concerns and input.

We all know that people will talk. Parents can have the conversation on the playground, or we can meet collaboratively to have the discussion at school council. The positive relationships and sense of community we've developed facilitates these conversations. We may not always agree (I almost guarantee we won't always agree), but we need to ensure we aren't scared to have the discussion and as a result, we will generally walk away with a greater understanding of the other's perspective and the rationale behind it. Neither party needs to feel threatened if we aren't on the same page, but rather, we will feel thankful that the other is open to listening and discussing. I've seen this at a COSC level.

When I first joined COSC many years ago, I remember Marianne Barrett presenting the draft 3 year education plan to us and she had parental engagement embedded in it. We talked about this and ultimately said, "But that might mean something different to us than it means to you." We struck a sub-committee and fleshed it out more. As part of our Parents as Partners discussion at COSC, this work came up again. I understand it's embedded in a results document approved by the Board in November 2013. It includes the following belief statements about parent engagement:

- There are many ways in which parents and schools engage with one another to ensure that every child is successful.
- Parent engagement is affected by a variety of variables. Multiple approaches to engagement are required.
- Engagement between parents and schools is a shared responsibility based on collaboration, trust, and respect.
- Engagement is continuous throughout a child's life and engagement changes over time.

- Engagement happens everywhere children learn: at home, at school, and the community. Engagement strategies must be responsive to the particular learning environment.
- Engagement is on-going, integrated in planning, and reflects sustained efforts.
- All forms of engagement have value.

Part of that framework talked about different levels of engagement: inform, consult, involve, and collaborate. Not every decision needs to be a full-blown collaboration, but it is important to know what level you want to hit before you start. And it's essential to let parents know too. Setting clear direction and expectations is critical. Some decisions are quick and you might just inform, but always keep in mind that sometimes there is an aspect you might not have considered and bringing it forward and asking for feedback can help you too. Other decisions are much larger and require a deeper commitment from parents, or more touchpoints along the way.

Being partners means that sometimes decisions take longer. But just as you would not make a major decision without discussing it with your staff, you ought to ensure you've had a discussion with your school council. It is important to build in this time requirement to the decision making process.

I believe that everyone in this room wants students to succeed. It's in our blood and part of our core beliefs as educators. Parents want the same result. I have heard Trina Boymook say many times, "We can not assume that because you are a parent, that you automatically know what parents will think. If you want to know, you should use your school council." Although many of you are parents, your lense is as a principal and is different than the lense of a parent who doesn't have your professional background. School Councils are an excellent means to gather input and gain legitimacy for decisions. It's easier to justify your decision to someone when you can say that you have the support of your school council.

I know what Parents as Partners means to me, but my views may be different than others, which is why we always need to ask and to honour the commitment level each parent wants. Some parents will be happy to photocopy and do bulletin boards, and others won't. The level of engagement will be different from parent to parent and it's very important to ask and not to assume and then provide opportunities to meet them at their level.

I asked the question, "What does Parents as Partners mean to you?" at my two school council meetings, as well as, at COSC and I want to include these thoughts today as well, so I want to share them too. Just as I tell you that you need to ask, so did I.

One parent said that they wanted to be acknowledged as the expert in their child. This line really struck me. No one knows my child better than me, as their parent.

Parents want to be part of the discussion before the decision is made; not just informed after. Parents have a different perspective. They want true, honest discussions where parent perspectives are given weight before a decision is made. An important part of this is closing the loop after the decision is made.

For some parents, it was providing them with supports and resources to support student learning at home.

They want to be kept informed of what is happening at school. A few mentioned how they love the Remind app.

They want to know that if they voice concerns or opinions, that they are being carried up to the district level if they do not have the opportunity to engage at that level.

An important aspect is to ensure enough time is given to gather input before making a decision.

A few parents mentioned that they had confidence in the school division and principals to make decisions on their behalf and that they didn't want input. It is important to understand, and to ask, what parents want, so that we can meet the desires of different parents.

There are tons of benefits as I've discussed, but exactly how do I do it?

Embrace the concept that we are all working together to maximize student learning. Utilize your school councils and have discussions. Gain their understanding and use their support to legitimize decisions. Ensure your school councils are effective. If you need help or support with this, the Alberta School Councils Association is an excellent resource and will provide free workshops and support to your school council. Their vision is to have an effective school council in every Alberta School. Ensure you are working with your school council chair to have great discussions on the agenda. As an added bonus, it will help increase attendance at the meetings.

Ask parents what partnership means to them and honour that. Not everyone will want the same level of engagement and just like we meet the diverse learning needs of all students, we need to meet the diverse engagement desires of parents.

It sounds easy, but it takes time and commitment, but in the end, if we do it well, we will ensure that have all worked collaboratively to build the best educational opportunities and experience for all students which is ultimately what we all want.