



Public School Boards'
Association of Alberta

The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta is the one organization which represents the unique interests of public school jurisdictions in the province. "We champion public school education."

Our Mission is:

To ensure the continuation and constant improvement of a universally accessible system of public education, which is locally governed, student centered, and challenging.

Our Goal is:

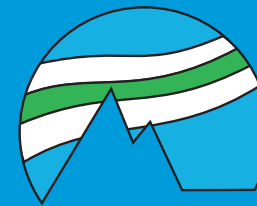
To provide constructive leadership - represented by effective strategies, advocacy, and communication - and to work with others, wherever possible, for the good of public education.

We Believe:

Public schools are the first choice of our communities, where all our children learn and live the values of democracy together, reflecting our hope and shaping the future of our communities.

STRAIGHT TALK

Connecting Education with Our Community



Public School Boards'
Association of Alberta

Tell me, I forget.
Show me, I remember.
Involve me, I understand.

A chinese proverb

Beginning the conversation

A practical guide for public deliberation

As members of the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta:

" We believe public schools are the first choice of our communities, where all our children learn and live the values of democracy together, reflecting our hope and shaping the future of our communities."

The PSBAA Foundation Statement



**Public Schools
Alberta's First Choice**

STRAIGHT TALK

STRAIGHT TALK

This workbook is based on one developed by

The Kettering Foundation (U.S.A.)

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We gratefully acknowledge that the Kettering Foundation gave the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta *generous permission* to revise what Kettering called HARD TALK, for use in Alberta.

The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta is solely responsible for this edition, which may be used in Canada provided there is no charge for its use, and provided this page (including the acknowledgement of the Kettering Foundation) is included.

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The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta

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STRAIGHT

- the shortest route to the goal
- true
- transparent
- without arrogance, defensiveness, or deference.

The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta is committed to strong communities and self-government by the people of the community. That commitment provides the rationale for workbooks such as this.

Every workbook raises issues for the "community", which presumes an understanding, shared among the participants, about which community - neighbourhood, municipal/school, regional (inter-municipal), provincial, or national - is the responsible community. All of us live simultaneously in a number of communities (like being in the centre of a number of concentric circles). Sometimes responsibility for an issue is shared among two or more of the communities in which citizens live. Since self-government is the common feature of every community in which we live, it is important that - as citizens - we often ask ourselves: "In which community do we want to self-govern which aspect of which issue(s)?"

Who's Listening?

We hope that this workbook will be used often, by individuals and groups. We hope that it will further self-government, and worthwhile goals, for citizens and for organizers.

Wherever it is used, the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta would like to be the "unseen guest". As sessions are held -- using this workbook -- as notes are compiled, we would appreciate receiving a copy of the record. In this way, every discussion could add to our knowledge about what people think and dream -- for community, self-government, and education.

Please send us a copy of your record, including a note about the circumstances - hosted by whom, where, and when. Whether you are in Alberta or anywhere else, your contribution will add to the richness of understanding about self-government, community, and public school education. We share everything we learn, so your contribution will become part of what is shared. Eventually your wisdom will come back to you again, with added richness.

Public school boards and the Association (the PSBAA) have an ongoing concern about citizen engagement, community, self-government and public school education that is inclusive and a model of a civil democratic society. Your input will help us make progress toward shared goals.

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(Electronic versions are easiest for us to work with; however, we welcome documentation in any format.)

Thank you for your contribution to citizenship.

Taking a Fresh Look at Education and Our Community

Today, many communities are seeking new ways to talk about many issues, including education. More and more citizens say they are frustrated by a lack of progress and action stemming from current discussions, or frustrated by misguided actions, or movement toward inappropriate goals. Frustration is compounded by the fact that citizens recognize the importance of the issue, and its implications.

All too often these discussions have been divisive, with citizens pointing fingers at each other -- trying to place blame on someone else for education's problems. These discussions turn into narrowly focused debates on class size, length of the school year, teachers' salaries, and other specific concerns that relate to schools and not necessarily to education. "Solution wars" then emerge over whom or what has priority, and the best strategy for action -- and citizens never move beyond specific problems and apparent solutions to discuss the larger, underlying issues. In addition, in many communities, discussions on education become dominated by a handful of citizens -- sometimes labeled as experts, and sometimes labeled as interest groups -- leaving little room for a larger public discussion even though education is tied to how a community lives and works and what its citizens value.

The purpose of STRAIGHT TALK is to help citizens break out of the old ways of talking about education and take the first steps toward developing a new approach. It is not intended to force through a strategy for addressing educational problems in a community. Rather, it encourages citizens to talk about education and their community in a way that enables them to take a step back -- to identify what it is they really seek.

STRAIGHT TALK enables citizens to look beneath their current debate to explore how education relates to what they want for the community and for children. In making these connections between education and their community, citizens are better prepared to refocus their discussions on education.

STRAIGHT TALK helps participants make these connections through a series of questions. The booklet is divided into four steps, each focusing on questions that will help citizens look at community and education in new ways. At the end of each of these steps, you will have created "products" - written proof of the accomplishments of the discussion. The moderator or recorder will record your comments on a flipchart.

Throughout the discussion of this issue, it will be important to identify the "core" community participants are focusing on. The "core community" may be different when dealing with different aspects of the issue.

1. What do we want for our community? Before talking about education, explore what kind of community you want. The object is to develop a public agenda. Discussion requires a target date: for this purpose we have chosen 2020.

2. Where does education fit into our public agenda? Consider the connections between what you want for your community and what you want education to be. By viewing education in terms of larger community goals you are challenged to redefine the way you think and talk about education. You now add educational goals to your public agenda.

3. What human capacities can we marshal to help us create the kind of community we want? Help participants recognize that, as individuals, they have a role to play in creating the conditions they want in their community. A goal of this section is to develop a list of capacities that each of you can call forth to build a better community - namely, a community capacity inventory.

4. Who do we need to work with to get the job done? Think about people who are not at the table: Who else should be involved in defining community and education goals? Developing a roster of individuals and groups that should be pulled into future discussions - on this issue a community roster.

Once your group has completed STRAIGHT TALK, you may find you want to keep your discussion moving forward. You may want to consider holding a series of STRAIGHT TALK meetings to broaden your public agenda, this time, perhaps, making an effort to include citizens and groups identified on the community roster.

Starting Points for Participants

* This process is aptly named STRAIGHT TALK, which accurately describes the difficult and challenging nature of conversations about the questions included in this booklet. You will be challenged to think and talk about education in a new way, which requires patience and the efforts of all participants.

* The best use of this workbook will occur when discussions are led by a moderator/facilitator, and participants agree to a few rules (such as the following, although participants may agree to different rules).

1. The intent of dialogue is to understand and learn from one another (you cannot "win" a dialogue). Be open and listen to others even when you disagree, and try not to rush to judgment.
2. Treat everyone in the dialogue as an equal: leave role, status and stereotypes at the door.
3. Search for assumptions (especially your own).
4. Listen with empathy to the views of others: acknowledge you have heard the other person, especially when you disagree.
5. Look for common ground.
6. Express disagreement in terms of ideas, not personality or motives.

* While the STRAIGHT TALK booklet contains only a limited number of questions, the discussion the questions prompt may require some time. This is especially true in Steps One and Two, where more analysis and "working through" is required. It is not uncommon for participants to take four to five hours to complete their discussion on the entire booklet. For this reason, you may want to spread the discussion over two sessions. At the end of each session, you will leave with a "product" - the conclusions you came to through the course of the discussion.

* STRAIGHT TALK is a general discussion on education and the community; the product will not be a strategy or plan to address education problems. That is not the purpose of this experience, but once completed, the result of the STRAIGHT TALK experience will inform trustees, and M.L.A.s and may encourage participants to continue to the next stage, involving wider public participation.

* During each of the steps, you will find that you may often be revising what was said previously, or making additions to your lists. This process is one of constant revision; nothing you say will be engraved in stone. Rather, there will be numerous opportunities throughout the discussion to change your mind or add new thoughts to the discussion.

Step #1:

Working toward a Public Agenda

While many communities have plans for how they intend to move forward to tackle their challenges, few seem to have an overall view of what the public's agenda really is. Thus, before citizens discuss what they want for education, it is first necessary to gain a sense of what they want for their community.

QUESTIONS

1. How big is your community, and what is its centre?
2. What do you value most in your community? Why is this important?
3. What conditions must prevail in your community in order to achieve what you want?

PRODUCT

The answers to these questions will serve as a starting point for a public agenda for your community - a list of those things that you want for your community. You should refer to them in the discussions that follow.

Step #2:

Making Connections between Education and the Community

Now that you have talked about what you want for your community, it is time to consider how this relates to education. The challenge is for you to make connections between what it is you want for your community and what you want for education. In effect, you will be redirecting the debate on education so that it reflects your public agenda for the community.

QUESTIONS

1. Given your public agenda, what do you want education in your community to be?

2. Now list some of the education problems and solutions that you recall have previously been put forward. What are they really trying to achieve?

3. Compare these ends to the values listed on your public agenda, and reflect on the similarities and differences between the two lists. Do you want to make some additional entries to your public agenda?

4. We live in a democracy: that is, we have choices to make about self-governing. Given your public agenda, why might communities self-govern education, and how could this be done best?

PRODUCT

The answers to the last question will likely result in an enlarged public agenda.

Step #3:

Uncovering Capacities

Communities can identify their more formal resources -- schools -- the organization of government, public agencies and officials -- but they are often unaware of the individual capacities citizens can bring to the table. This section is about uncovering these capacities to help individuals see roles for themselves in creating the community they want.

QUESTIONS

1. Teachers, principals, and public officials can help realize the goals on your public agenda. Who else can play a role in bringing about desired ends?

2. What can I do personally to build a better community? What experiences and capacities do I have that can be brought to bear on this goal?

3. What new kinds of things would you be willing and able to undertake?

PRODUCT

Responses to these questions will lead to a list of capabilities that individual citizens can call upon to bring about the conditions we want in our community to create a community capacities inventory.

Step #4:

Identifying Others Who Can Help Us Get the Job Done

In this last step you should begin to consider others in the community who you may need to work with you, in order to move ahead on your agenda. You should include in your considerations, people you do not customarily work with or those who always seem to be missing from these kinds of discussions. You should think, too, about people who hold different or opposing views from those expressed in your group.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is missing from the room whose help will be needed in order to begin work on your public agenda?

2. Who could be the "tough customers" in the community - those who appear disinterested or hold opposing views - the "other" people you need to work with?

3. Why are the missing people not in the room? How can we get them here if we want to continue to the next stage?

PRODUCT

We have created a community roster of individuals and groups with whom we may need to work, in order to reach our public agenda.

Reflecting on Our STRAIGHT TALK

Let's review the work that we have done in each of the four steps of STRAIGHT TALK. In summary, how did we answer the following questions?

1(a). Day in, day out, what is our "core" community?

1(b). What do we want for our community?

2. How does what we want for education relate to what we want for our community?

3. What sorts of things can I do as an individual to create the kind of community we want?

4. Who do we need to work with so that we can move forward on our public agenda? Through this discussion, what did we learn about ourselves? How will we now talk differently about education?