

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

April 25, 2000

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: E. Dosdall, Superintendent of Schools

ORIGINATORS: G. Reynolds, Department Head
B. Tams, Principal, Lynnwood School

SUBJECT: District Review of the Student-Parent-Staff Satisfaction Surveys

RESOURCE
STAFF: Marie Caley, Audrey Gardiner, George Rice, Bev Sawyer, Victor Tanti,
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INFORMATION

In response to concerns expressed by trustees and the superintendent regarding last year's survey responses, a small committee of principals and district staff reviewed the District's Satisfaction Surveys during the fall of 1999. This report outlines the review process and the actions taken to address the issues and concerns of stakeholders regarding the existing process.

Committee Review Process

The committee's review was extensive, with input sought from stakeholders including a Key Communicator's parent focus group, ATA representatives, the Student Advisory Team, the Teachers' Advisory Group, Superintendent's Council, principals' Vertical Teams, and Liaison Committee representatives for Custodial, Exempt, Maintenance and Support staff. The committee was interested in hearing the benefits of the current process, what needed changing, and suggestions for alternative approaches.

The considerable input received was analyzed, coded, and discussed, with emerging themes and issues noted. While some stakeholders advocated major changes or elimination of the surveys, the majority indicated that our current framework was essentially sound but within that framework, some changes needed to be made. It was found that there was general consistency in the identification of concerns, and common beliefs as to the benefits of the survey process.

The staff, student, and parent surveys were revised (APPENDICES I – X), reviewed externally, and field-tested, to ensure alignment to the district's work, to increase clarity and consistency of survey administration, and to reduce ambiguity of response and interpretation.

Background

The district satisfaction survey began in 1979, the same year in which school based budgeting was implemented. The rationale for the survey was outlined in a report to Board, dated May 28, 1979:

“The installation of a monitoring system is based upon the assumption that having defined our institutional purposes, it logically follows that we ought to define some common measures of performance and obtain data so that principals and teachers, Associate Superintendents and Superintendent, have some tangible feedback as a basis for program planning and management of the system in the coming year. A monitoring system is essential in an organization designed to encourage involvement in the decision-making process at all levels.”

Objective: “To measure student, parent, and staff satisfaction in accordance with the following school system purposes:

- Students develop positive attitudes toward self, others, school and education;
- The community feels the district is performing satisfactorily;
- The district’s employees feel the district is a good place to work.”

In 1980 Edmonton Public Schools contracted Price Waterhouse Associates to review the survey’s various design components to ensure that:

- The survey provided reliable results
- The results were arithmetically correct and that anonymity and confidentiality were maintained

Price Waterhouse Associates concluded that “the survey is highly credible and will doubtlessly prove its usefulness to the board and administration in their assessment of policy.”

The survey questionnaires were reviewed annually and questions modified based on recommendations from staff and administration.

In 1995 a major review of the survey questionnaires and process was conducted with extensive involvement of staff, students, parents and staff representative groups. Additions, deletions, and modifications of survey questions were made. The process, however, remained the same.

Another review of the survey was undertaken in 1998 by a principal committee to align the survey questions with the recently developed District Standards. Input was again requested and received from principals and staff representative groups.

Purpose for the Surveys

There has been considerable discussion as to the purpose for, and use of, the surveys. Since the initial introduction of the survey in 1979, its purpose has become somewhat less precisely focused from its original use as a performance measure. A multiplicity of purposes has come

to be implied by the addition of particular questions, and by the uses made of survey results. Among the stated opinions regarding the survey's purpose are the following, which are representative of responses from principal, parents, students, and staff groups:

- a “snapshot” of the situation at a given moment
- a vehicle to highlight opinions and areas of concern
- a way to open dialogue
- identification of issues
- a basis for comparison with other schools and the district
- allows for and encourages accountability
- provides information about trends over time

Other responses, however, express the difficulty in dealing with concerns that may be suggested, because of the vagueness of some of the questions. They suggest that the wording of all questions must be reviewed for clarity. As well, if responsiveness is the purpose, other formats might provide clearer guidance.

Principals and others have expressed concern with regard to the use of the survey for staff evaluation. The ethical issue in evaluating the principal anonymously was mentioned several times by principals; on the other hand, teachers indicated that they value the opportunity to criticize without identifying themselves. Principals also questioned the degree to which survey results are used in their evaluation by the superintendent.

Recently, another purpose has been implied by the addition of particular questions. For example, questions were added to assess the degree to which district standards are being achieved. However, several respondents to this committee's questionnaires suggest that such information could be gained in other ways, thus realigning the survey to address critical areas of our school and district operations, and allowing a focus on priority areas.

After consideration of the many views and responses, it became apparent that we needed to clearly define the purpose for the annual surveys, indicating both the usefulness and limitations of a generic, large-scale survey.

Action:

While the survey cannot provide all the information needed by a school or a decision-unit, it should be communicated that the surveys will continue to serve the following purposes:

- Perception check, that “takes the pulse of the school and the district”
- Provide longitudinal information and track trends within a school and the district
- Identify issues, areas of growth, and areas of concern which schools and the district may investigate further
- Accountability

Timing of Surveys

Concerns were expressed that the surveys are “time-biased” or reflective of events that happen at, or close to, the time of the administration of the surveys. This is a concern that is

endemic to any survey or questionnaire – it is a snapshot of the views of respondents at that particular point in time. This concern cannot be eliminated, but can be addressed by: a) Interpreting the annual survey information within the context of the all of the information that is available within the school or district, and b) Using multi-year survey information for a broad perspective that is less dependent upon isolated or time-specific factors.

Principals in particular, suggested that the administration of the surveys should be aligned so that information from the surveys could be used for budgeting and school planning during January and February. Upon review, this change in timing is not recommended. The surveys would need to be administered well before the mid-point of the school year, which is problematic in that respondents may not have enough experience or information about the school or district (as has been indicated by respondents on principal confirmation surveys which are administered in January). As well, up to eight weeks is required to process the surveys and disseminate results. While survey results could provide some information for budget planning and decision making, the timing of the budget process precludes a complete picture of stakeholder perception or satisfaction if December survey results were to be used.

If schools wish to gather information through the use of district survey questionnaires, this decision can be made at the school level. Currently, some schools do arrange for administration and analysis of surveys at the end of each term, or at the mid-point of the school year. As well, schools are able to use the existing surveys or customized surveys of their own choice, as needed, at any time during the school year.

Annual survey information, completed in May and based upon the majority of the school year, can be effectively used in the fall as a staff or decision unit considers the goals and action plans that will be implemented during the new school year.

Action:

- Administer the annual surveys in the late spring, with results provided to schools and the district for school opening in the fall.

Survey Administration Process

A need was expressed to establish a consistent process for administration of the surveys to ensure that respondents understand the purpose of the surveys, why their views are important and how to consider the questions. It is recommended that the revised surveys include printed information and directions for staff and parents, and clear instructions for all schools to use when administering the surveys to students. This would establish a consistent and meaningful context for survey administration and responses, and minimize the effect of who administers the surveys.

Respondents, especially students, need to understand what “most of the time” means, and be encouraged to think about the whole year, rather than just the events of that day, or of the current week. The elementary student survey would have key points to provide orally during survey administration while the junior and senior high school surveys would include a cover page with key ideas noted.

Action:

- A clear and consistent protocol has been developed to assist with the administration of surveys to staff, parents and students.

Survey Questionnaires

Our annual surveys will provide us with meaningful data if questions are focused, clear and useful. Concern was expressed from all groups about specific questions in each survey, indicating that all questionnaires needed to be revised to remove ambiguity, to increase clarity and to allow for useful interpretation. While district staff were able to accomplish these major revisions, an independent research firm was asked to review all revised surveys, prior to field testing within the district.

In revising the district surveys, some questions were deleted, others added or changed, and all questions were grouped into topical categories, which align to the work of the school and the district. A category called Issues and Trends was also added. The intent is that questions in this category would be specific to current issues and trends and would possibly change from year to year.

In reviewing the student survey it was determined that by asking fewer, clearer, more focused questions, one survey questionnaire could be used for all elementary students in grades one to six. Administering one survey to the elementary population (rather than the current practice of two different surveys) would result in cost savings to the district, and alleviate the concern of administering surveys to young kindergarten students who may have little sense of the world of school beyond their own classroom.

Action:

- The committee has revised all surveys (students, staff, and parents).
- The revised elementary student survey will be administered to grades one to six and eliminated for kindergarten students.
- Revised surveys have been reviewed by Statistics Canada.
- The revised survey questionnaires have been field tested within the district.

Sources and Use of Information

EPS has a long history of gathering information through the use of annual satisfaction surveys. There are very few school districts that have a comparable process in place, and of those that do, several have modeled their process upon that used by EPS. Independent research organizations, such as Gallup, also have comparable surveys for parents and students, with a limited number of questions, focused on key areas. In this context, EPS has established a process that enables us to take the pulse of our district at a given point in time, to track trends over time, and to identify areas of concern to our stakeholders.

The revisions to the survey will define specific areas for benchmarking, and increase clarity within the process and the surveys themselves. The annual satisfaction surveys cannot tell us everything we need to know about every facet of our organization, nor can they tell us the reasons why people think as they do.

The use of an annual satisfaction survey does not preclude the need to continue to gather and interpret information on an ongoing basis throughout the year, through various sources and for different purposes. Annual survey information should be supplemented, and there are many ways to gather information, with some ways better suited for particular questions and concerns than others. Principals have indicated that information about their school or DU is gathered through focus groups, interviews, individual conversations, third party audits, newsletter responses, school council meetings, staff one-on-ones, budget planning and committee meetings, staff meetings, and in-school surveys with customized questions. Similar processes are applicable at the district level.

Critical to our understanding of the issues that concern our stakeholders is our interpretation of data within the context of all of the information that is available to us. The collection and dissemination of survey data is not a goal in itself. Increasingly our task is to identify what information is needed and to determine how we will use the information that we have to advance our district and school goals.

Action:

- Continue to gather information in a variety of ways, for a variety of purposes, on an ongoing basis within individual schools, DU's and the district. Emphasize the interpretation and strategic use of information to accomplish district and school goals.

Implications of Survey Changes

Data from the surveys are embedded within the District Standards and the Three-year Plan as indicators of stakeholder satisfaction and district improvement. Similarly, data from the annual satisfaction surveys have been used to fulfill Alberta Learning's requirements for district information. These documents and requirements should be reviewed as to the impact of changes made to the satisfaction survey questions.

Survey data are convenient and readily available; there may be a tendency to use these data in ways for which they were not originally intended or best suited. It is suggested that as we undertake or consider district initiatives, we exercise diligence to ensure that the annual survey is used for its intended purposes. The integrity of the survey process and its perceived value will be enhanced if we recognize the limitations inherent in this process, and maintain a clear understanding of why we are collecting this type of information and how it is useful to us.

BT:mjl

APPENDIX I:	Grades 1 – 6 Student Satisfaction Survey
APPENDIX II:	Grades 7 – 9 Student Satisfaction Survey
APPENDIX III:	Grades 10 – 12 Student Satisfaction Survey
APPENDIX IV:	Teaching Staff Satisfaction Survey
APPENDIX V:	School Support/Custodial Staff Satisfaction Survey
APPENDIX VI:	School Exempt Staff Satisfaction Survey
APPENDIX VII:	Principal Satisfaction Survey
APPENDIX VIII:	Elementary/Junior High Parent Satisfaction Survey
APPENDIX IX:	Senior High Parent Satisfaction Survey
APPENDIX X:	Central Services Exempt-Teachers/Support/Maintenance Staff Satisfaction Survey
APPENDIX XI:	1999 Satisfaction Surveys Indicating Additions, Changes, and Deletions