

**University of Alberta**

Supporting and Fostering Parental Engagement in Northern Alberta Rural Elementary Schools  
by

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### **Abstract**

For many years, educational researchers have attempted to answer the questions, how do effective school leaders involve parents in education and what effects, if any, does this increased involvement have on student academic success. Building on the works of Jeynes (2018), Goodall and Montgomery (2014), Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), and Stelmach and Herrera-Farfan (2019), this article will attempt to analyse and review effective means to foster and support parental engagement in northern Alberta rural elementary schools. This study was conducted in Peace River School Division using three principals as the study group. I begin by first examining the confusion between parental school involvement and parental engagement in student academics and the assumptions around the effects of parental engagement. A literature review around the topic of parental engagement was conducted and used to analyse the responses from the study with particular focus on identifying barriers to parental engagement and effective strategies to increase engagement in local communities. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results of the study including: (a) an understanding of involvement and engagement, (b) strategies for establishing relationships and trust, (c) understanding and sensitivity to barriers and, (d) the importance of planning for implementation. Finally, I postulate a series of recommendations to the Peace River School Division outlining: (a) a professional development plan, (b) revisions to current policies and administrative procedures, (c) benefits of future research and collaboration to the division and other surrounding districts, (d) the need to examine parental engagement through the lens of a potential shift in the education paradigm, and (e) the need for the profession to establish causality so a direct connection between increased parental engagement and improved academic results can be determined.

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## **Fostering and Supporting Parental Engagement in Peace River School Division**

Parental involvement in education has been a topic of considerable interest among researchers concerned with the optimal development and educational outcomes of schools, particularly at the elementary level (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In this initial section, I will outline the purpose of this qualitative study, followed by a discussion of the continuum of involvement to engagement, and finally some assumptions around parental engagement and its perceived effects on student results.

### ***Purpose of Study***

The purpose of my study was threefold: (a) to gain insights from site-based principals who are already successful in supporting parent communities into strategies for transitioning from school involvement to parental engagement, (b) to identify barriers to both school involvement and parental engagement and strategies to overcome them, and (c) to identify best practices for parental engagement. If we assume parents need to be engaged and they have meaningful contributions to their children's education, research must then focus on:

- What do successful educational leaders do to support this engagement?
- What barriers exist (education level, culture, willingness)?
- How do successful leaders remove them?

If instructional leaders understand how to meaningfully engage the parents in their school communities, there is the potential to see significant school-wide, even division-wide, improvement in student success. The overall objective is to provide principals in similar contexts with the best strategies to engage their parent communities in the education of their children which ultimately could lead to improved student learning.

### ***Involvement and Engagement***

Parental involvement and engagement in their child's education is pretty much universally accepted as beneficial and of the utmost importance (Goodall, 2013). However, there is a considerable spectrum in what constitutes school involvement and the difference with parental engagement. Parental involvement is often school-centric, teacher directed, and teacher valued (Stelmach & Herrera-Farfan, 2019). It is often limited to helping with homework and teacher-initiated projects, parent-teacher interviews, serving on school councils, and helping with school-initiated events. In my experience, while there is value to this and parents should not be discouraged, parents can, and arguably should, take more active and impactful roles if they hope to improve their child's results. The goal should ultimately be parents engaged with the school in ways to improve their children's academic success.

Goodall and Montgomery (2014) define involvement as the act of taking part in an activity or event or situation. In a school setting this could be seen as parents involved in fundraising, helping with school events such as track meets, and preparing hot lunches. Engagement on the other hand is defined as the feeling of being involved in a particular activity or a formal arrangement to meet someone or to do something, especially as part of your public duties. Engagement would seem to encompass more than just activity; there is some feeling of ownership of the activity which is greater than is present with simple involvement. They go on to state "parental engagement will involve a greater commitment, a greater ownership of action, than will parental involvement with schools" (p. 400).

Goodall and Montgomery (2014) propose a continuum rather than a straight line between school involvement at one end, and parental engagement with children's learning at the other. It is important to note school involvement is not wrong, nor should it be ignored. Rather, the

process should be viewed as a continuous one, with parental engagement with children's learning as a goal, which is constantly supported by the other points along the way. "It is not expected there will be a simple, clear progression from point one to point three; equally, it is important point three is reached only when individual schools – and cohorts of parents – are ready" (p. 400).

Of particular importance is the understanding engagement with children's learning may not equate to, and should not be judged on the basis of, engagement with the school (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). "Many parents, particularly those from ethnic minorities or those facing economic challenge, find engagement with schools difficult, but still have a strong desire to be involved in their children's learning and educations" (p. 400). It is critical for principals to understand a lack of consideration for the needs of families, such as times of meetings and facilities available, is a significant barrier to the active engagement of some parents.

### ***Assumptions About Parental Engagement***

Most researchers agree parental involvement with schools and engagement with student academics foster positive learning environments and lead to student academic success. Indeed, I was unable to find a credible researcher who disagreed with the notion involvement and engagement were important. Statements such as "parental engagement in children's learning is extremely important" (Goodall, 2013, p. 136), "parental involvement in child and adolescent education generally benefits children's learning and social success" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 3), and "community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort" (Stelmach & Herrera-Farfan, 2019, p. 3) often make up the front matter of any article about parental engagement. Jeynes (2018) even goes so far as to state, "social science research has established that parental involvement and engagement are associated with higher

academic outcomes among children” (p. 147). While I think it would be short sighted to think otherwise, what is missing in the literature is causative evidence. My research on the subject, while not exhaustive, was unable to provide any empirical evidence showing parental engagement directly results in improved test scores among students. Indeed, when we look at Alberta before and after 1995, when the government mandated school councils, there is no discernable change in provincial achievement test scores. While I am not disagreeing with the existing literature, it is clear there is a need for future empirical research on the subject.

### **Literature Review**

Unfortunately, the research does not clearly agree on what constitutes parental involvement and parental engagement (Goodall, 2013). While research shows parental engagement has a positive impact on student results (Epstein & Becker 1982; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1997), there is little research to show how parents effectively transition from being involved on the periphery to being an active and engaged part in their child’s education and what the role of the school leader is.

Much of the literature and research on school involvement and parental engagement can be broken into three themes: (a) what motivates parents to be involved, (b) models for examining or describing current parental involvement, and (c) practical models for moving parents from involvement to engagement. In order to determine what are the best practices to move parents from school involvement to parental engagement we must first understand why parents become involved, how do we engage parents from Indigenous and other minority families, what this involvement looks like along the continuum to engagement, and what are some current examples of how to move parents from involvement to engagement.

### ***What Motivates Parents to be Involved?***

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) outline parents' motivation to become involved in a three-point model: (a) the parent's construction of his or her role in the child's life, (b) the parent's sense of efficacy for helping his or her child succeed in school, and (c) the general invitations, demands, and opportunities for parental involvement presented by both the child and the child's school. They state a parent's sense of role in child rearing and education is highly contextual and is impacted by societal elements of family, school, church, and the broader culture (p. 17). Further to this, a parent's motivation to be involved will be influenced by the parental role expectations held by the various groups in which they hold membership. A parent's sense of efficacy in helping their child seems to be directly related to their level of involvement. A parent's belief in their abilities and how their actions will result in positive outcomes is of key importance. Finally, the extent to which parents believe themselves to be invited by both the child and the school to be part of the educational process is critical, particularly if their construction of role and belief in their self efficacy is low. A strong understanding of why parents are motivated to be involved will be crucial if we are to understand what will effectively move them from involvement to engagement in a northern Alberta rural context.

### ***Models for Examining Parental Involvement***

Goodall and Montgomery (2014) describe the movement from parental involvement to parental engagement as a three-point model. They outline the steps as follows: (a) parental involvement with the school, (b) parental involvement with schooling, and (c) parental engagement with children's learning. As parental agency increases throughout the continuum, school agency decreases but only with respect to parental engagement with children's

learning. They state it is important to understand this should not cause tension between the school's agency for teaching and the parent's agency for engagement but rather they should work together.

Stelmach and Herrera-Farfan (2019) analyse parental participation on school councils through Arnstein's ladder of participation. This is of particular interest to this study since school councils are legislated in Alberta and the context in which this analysis was done, Saskatchewan, shares many educational similarities to Northern Alberta. In this analysis, they outline parental involvement from nonparticipation (manipulation, therapy and informing) to degrees of tokenism (informing, consultation, placation) to degrees of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, and citizen control). In their study, Stelmach and Herrera-Farfan (2019) concluded school councils, and by extension parents, were far more likely to have higher levels of participation when the school leadership empowered parents to do so. When principals took the school council mandate seriously, empowered parents to make decisions, and built parental capacity, parental engagement at a higher level was not only possible but probable.

### ***Current Models for Parental Engagement***

It is important to understand what is already working in other contexts to have a baseline with which to compare what is working, or not working, in Northern Alberta rural schools. Jeynes (2018) outlines a model he refers to as the Dual Navigation Approach. This model is based on six meta-analyses conducted over a fifteen-year period. Jeynes (2018) states first, school leaders and teachers need to desire and accept parental participation and second, parents need to desire to become involved as well. Due to the parental perception that teachers are education specialists, parents have gradually withdrawn from their responsibilities with respect to their children's schooling. However, if school leaders are familiar with the DNA

rubric, which outlines parental involvement to engagement, they have the opportunity to make a significant difference with respect to family connectivity with the school.

Goodall (2013) she outlines a six-point model to support children's learning. This six model is comprised of: (a) authoritative parenting - a high level of control combined with practises to move towards child autonomy, (b) learning in the home - being involved as opposed to providing a place for homework, (c) beginning engagement with learning early - stimulating and sustaining learning from an early age, (d) staying engaged throughout school, (e) holding and passing on high aspirations and, (f) taking an active interest in children's learning and education (Goodall, 2013). Goodall (2013) points out while the model is effective, it is not a solution. Each school must adapt the model to their own context and there is no one size fits all solution (p. 146).

### ***Engaging Indigenous and Minority Parents***

In a 2016 Canadian census, 6.5% of the population of Alberta identified and registered or possessed Treaty Indian status (Government of Canada, 2016). This percentage of course varies depending on where you look. For example, in Peace River School Division, 27% of the students are Indigenous. Visible minorities in Alberta make up almost a quarter of the population, the majority of which were South Asian, Filipino, and Chinese (Government of Canada, 2016). Almost 85% of these visible minorities lived in urban environments, the majority in Edmonton or Calgary. In both cases, these percentages are on the rise, both in urban and rural communities and for a variety of reasons. Effective principals must then adapt to this changing demographic. Principals need to ask: (a) are existing strategies for school involvement and parental engagement as effective with these unique groups? (b) do Indigenous and minority

parents have differing views on what constitutes involvement and engagement? (c) are the overall goals for education viewed differently?

When we examine effective ways to engage Indigenous parents, Friedel (1999) points out the importance of first understanding the notion of cultural invasion. It is widely accepted Indigenous parents who experienced the residential school system as children will not fully enter into school activities once they become parents themselves (Haig-Brown, 1988). Public schools, like residential schools, tend to remain closed to Indigenous parents; they continue to exist as isolated islands outside of the community (Friedel, 1999). It is therefore essential for a principal to understand highly effective strategies, such as those outlined in the work of Stockdale, Parsons, and Beauchamp (2013), in order to meaningfully engage Indigenous parents.

Successful principals will take the time to really “know” the Indigenous community. This not only includes being comfortable attending community functions such as tea dances but also understanding the impact of historical events, particularly residential schools (Stockdale et al., 2013). Gaining the trust of the community is essential. Highly effective principals foster and nurture a sense of culture and tradition within the school. This goes beyond simple displays and discussion. These activities must be part of daily school life. Indeed, we must understand the very process of learning is viewed very differently in Indigenous culture. Use of Indigenous language for instruction, connecting the learning to the land, and rooting it in tradition are all key to creating a meaningful learning experience for Indigenous students. A family-based working and learning environment, one in which the whole community is involved in the learning process is also critical. The statement the whole community raises a child is most evident in Indigenous schools. Finally, effective principals listen, care, and support the people with whom they work on professional and personal matters. They understand they are strong and vital supports and

play a role in helping the community-building skills for parents and community members. Principals must be passionate, stand for what they believe in, and foster hope within their schools and communities. This hope becomes the essence of who community members are and what they stand for within the community.

While many of the strategies for engaging Indigenous parents can be successfully implemented with other minority groups, particularly understanding the culture, traditions, and values of the group, we must be cognisant of the fact minority groups come with their own unique challenges when it comes to parental engagement. Often minority groups have language barriers which make parents unwilling or unable to fully engage with the school. Every effort must be made by the principal and staff to reduce the impact of this so parents feel comfortable in the school setting. We must also remember different cultures may have very different views on the role of the school and the role parents play in education. As with Indigenous families, it is vital the principal get to know the community well and understand the traditions and values of the various groups within their community. By understanding the goals and values of the community, a principal can effectively foster an environment which reflects those needs and engage parents so as to create trust and ownership.

### **Methodology**

The overall structure of this study was qualitative interview model where principals were asked to give feedback about school involvement and parental engagement in their own schools. Topics centred around best practises for engaging parents and barriers unique to their setting with the goal of discerning common threads and unique perspectives on the topic. In this section, I outline the conceptual design of the study, describe the respondent group, and illustrate how the data was collected.

### ***Design***

For the purposes of my study, I approached this research as a case study as all participants were part of the same larger group, the Peace River Division. Drawing on a grounded theory research paradigm combined with critical praxis research approach, it is my intention the data from this study will not lead to paradigm shifting results. The data from this study will lead to further research and ultimately, more data.

### ***Respondent Group***

The respondent group for my study consisted of three principals from the Peace River School Division (PRSD). Selection was based on advice from PRSD Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, Dr. Jeff Thompson. Respondents needed to have principal or vice principal and teaching experience, currently hold the position of principal, and a proven track record of successful parental engagement. The first respondent, Mark (pseudonym), had over twenty years of principal and parental engagement experience at the high school and middle school level when data collection occurred. At the time of the interview, the second respondent, Brigitte (pseudonym), had six years of experience as a principal or vice principal and over thirty years of teaching experience, both at the elementary level. The third, Sandra (pseudonym), was a principal with five years of experience mostly at K-12 schools.

Prior to contacting the respondents, an application was filed with the Peace River School Division to conduct research. This included completing and forwarding the Research Application (Appendix A) and Research Request Approval Form (Appendix B) to Dr. Jeff Thompson, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning. This application package also included a template of the respondent Letter of Introduction (Appendix C), respondent Consent Form (Appendix D), and Interview Questions (Appendix E). A copy of the University of

Alberta EDPS 509 Ethics Approval letter had already been forwarded to him. All of this was done in accordance with PRSD's Administrative Procedure 290 Research Studies. Once approval to conduct research was obtained, I moved to respondent consent.

The respondent was contacted via email (Appendix F) inquiring if they would participate in the research project. The respondent was provided with a Letter of Introduction, a Consent Form, Interview Questions, and the Research Request Approval Form signed by the Assistant Superintendent. Upon receiving written approval to participate in the research study and the signed consent form, a mutually agreeable date and time for the interview was decided upon. As outlined in the introduction of the interview schedule, introduction letter, and initial email, participation was completely voluntary and would not proceed without the written consent of the respondent.

### ***Data Collection***

Throughout this qualitative study, data were collected through a series of virtual interviews using Google Meet. Transcripts for each interview were created using the transcription service, Scribbl for Google Meet. Initial transcripts were then manually checked against the Google Meet recording for accuracy. Pseudonyms were used for all names. Each respondent was interviewed once, and interviews were carried out at mutually agreed upon times (morning, afternoon, and evening respectively). A schedule of the interview questions is attached in Appendix G. Questions were designed to generate feedback from all the categories of questions as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and included questions on background and demographics, knowledge of the concept, experience with the concept, sensory, and opinion/value. It should be noted this schedule was altered slightly after the first interview.

Feedback was received from the professor of this course and the schedule was altered to enable me to use questions to generate more data.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure validity and accuracy of the data in this study, I employed a variety of methods to ensure what was said accurately reflected what the respondents meant. First, all interviews were recorded in their entirety in two ways. Each interview was video recorded using Google Meet's recording feature. The interview was also recorded using Scribbl, a digital transcription service. The transcript was then checked and edited against the video recording to ensure the transcript accurately reflected what was said. These transcripts, along with a summary created by the author, were then submitted back to the respondents to ensure what was meant to be said was accurately reflected in the transcript. All three respondents received the same set of interview questions and where possible similar probing questions were used. Finally, this study was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta and was handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants.

### **Limitations**

While I believe my study identifies some key strategies, barriers and methods for overcoming said barriers, there are limitations to this study which keep it from being considered authentic research on this topic. One of such limitation is the level of parental engagement experience in the respondents. In the case of this study, all respondents had considerable experience in engaging parental communities and while it was necessary to gather sufficient data for this study, it would have been helpful to interview principals with more limited experience to identify their perspectives on barriers and strategies for successfully engaging parents.

Another limitation centres around the fact all the respondents are from the same school division and likely have had similar ideas and training on parental engagement. If this study were to be expanded in the future, principals from neighbouring divisions and divisions with similar but diverse enough mission statements, should be included. Keeping to the scope of northern Alberta rural principals, I would have included respondents from Holy Family Catholic Regional Division, Northland School Division, and High Prairie School Division. Northland School Division would have been particularly interesting as it is predominantly an Indigenous school division with small, remote schools.

A third limitation, more specifically a bias, was the familiarity of the respondents to the interviewer. I have considerable experience working with the principals and vice principals of this division and it was difficult to find respondents I was unfamiliar with. In the case of respondent three, Sandra, I have co-authored papers with her on this research topic, and I feel there was a definite bias in her responses as there was a sense of her giving me responses that would fit the research. It should be noted, however, respondent three was a replacement for my original choice, a principal with whom I have worked very little. However, since the original choice was unable to participate, Sandra was chosen out of necessity to complete the assignment. While I have outlined the limitations of my study, I feel there is certainly credible evidence generated from this study and certain limitations were addressed. The respondents included both genders were of various ages. Respondents came from a range of school types including a primary-only school, a middle school, and a K-12 school; perhaps a principal from a school of only high school aged students would have been a valid addition. Respondents came from schools with various student populations ranging from quite small (under 75 students) to quite large (over 250 students) for the division in question.

### **Analysis of the Data**

As this is a qualitative study, the analysis of the data focused on looking for common responses for each category or question. While none of the respondents gave responses contradictory to mainstream research and would not be viewed as particularly unique or insightful, they would have been analysed independently should they have occurred. When analysing the data to identify barriers, strategies, and importance of parental engagement, I looked not only for themes which were mentioned by all the respondents but for the frequency each respondent mentioned each theme. Ideas mentioned by all three were given a higher score as were areas repeated with higher frequency by each respondent.

### ***Experience and Role***

Years of experience varied from twenty-two years in the case of Mark, to six years for Brigitte, and three years in the case of Sandra, although she mentioned this was in her current role and she had previous experience several years prior to her current position. Mark and Brigitte also bring the perspective of being parents to the study although it is unclear if this had a significant impact on their responses. All three described their role in engaging parents as (a) leading school councils and (b) the importance of maintaining clear and effective communication. Mark and Brigitte also remarked on the importance of engaging parents in extracurricular activities such as sports and special events while Sandra mentioned the need of keeping parents happy. Mark and Sandra focused solely on their experience as principals while Brigitte also included her role as a classroom teacher and described her role as managing parent volunteers.

While increased experience would seem to make principals more at ease in working with parents, experience alone will not guarantee a higher quality of relationship with parents.

Sandra's limited experience appears to have been as effective, if not closer to actual parental engagement, than Mark's extensive experience which seems to be solely focused on parental involvement with school activities. Another key finding is there is a need for a clear understanding at the division level of what the role of the principal is in parental engagement. All three respondents focused on being involved in school councils, engaging parents in extra curricular activities, and creating good lines of communication. While all three are certainly necessary in laying the groundwork for a school culture where parents are actively engaging in student academic success, it is clear there is a gap in understanding what the role of the principal is in transitioning parents to being involved in schooling and ultimately to being engaged in student academic success.

### ***School Involvement vs. Parental Engagement***

Mark saw school involvement as a means to ultimately create parental engagement, although it was unclear if a clear understanding of parental engagement existed. It was his view that through involvement in activities such as parent meetings, organizing events, fundraising, and school projects, parental engagement would naturally occur. It was his belief the role of the principal is to create a "hook" to get parents involved. In Brigitte's case, she saw a clear separation between the two with school involvement being comprised of activities such as playground fundraising, reading to students, and hot lunch programs while parental engagement involved a partnership between the parent and the teacher in creating academic goals. She saw parental engagement as engaging in individual program plan goal creation in collaboration with the teacher and her role as principal was to facilitate this partnership. While Sandra also saw a clear distinction between school involvement and parental engagement, she expanded the role of the parent to involvement in student mental and social emotional health along with involvement

in the program decision making process. She saw parents as a potential resource for specific program development and delivery and through this, parental engagement would be achieved.

### ***Barriers to Involvement and Engagement***

In all three cases, the most important barrier reported was time. Parents and caregivers have a lot on their plate whether it is supporting their children in extracurricular activities such as sports and dance or the pressures of work. In Sandra's case, her community is a farming community and parents are most often busy with responsibilities which come with managing a farm. Indeed, she mentioned older students are often also involved, and academics can take a back seat. As both Mark and Brigitte pointed out, parents are "burnt out" and often find it difficult to either be involved with the school or be engaged with their child's academics.

Another barrier mentioned by both Brigitte and Sandra was the difficulty of engaging minority groups. Both schools have student populations who identify as Indigenous and both respondents outlined difficulties in engaging these parents. This included past negative history with their own education, a belief they are unable to adequately help their children with academic subjects, poverty and difficult home situations, and differences in belief on how education should be delivered. Brigitte's school also has a population of immigrant families, particularly Filipino, who face their own challenges. Language barriers and differing beliefs on the role of parents in education were identified as key barriers for engaging parents of this group.

A third barrier identified by both Brigitte and Sandra was the lack of priority of academics by certain parents. While a good education was important to parents in both schools, many parents cited other areas of equal or greater importance. In Brigitte's case, she provided examples of parents who wanted "more well-rounded education" for their children. She indicated parents often focused their attention on areas such as sports, arts, or dance because this

is where they felt they could have the most impact. In Sandra's community, parents emphasized the importance of students being prepared for life in an agricultural community. While education was again seen as important, the skills necessary to work and be successful working in the agricultural industry was of equal or greater importance. The very purpose of education has become a point of tension. Further to this, both respondents identified a small segment of the parent population who simply did not value the need for a high degree of academics. They cited these parents often did not possess a high degree of education and did not see the need for their children to do so. What was good for them was good enough for their children.

A final barrier identified by all three respondents, although this could be viewed as a limitation of this study, was the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and ultimately on the level of parental engagement. Continual switching between in person and online learning, family economic upheaval, attendance issues, and an overall lack of engagement in education were all cited as significant barriers to parental engagement over the last two years. In all three cases, respondents noted it has been very difficult to bring parents in or engage them at home because it simply was against the protocols. Parents who had previously been heavily involved with the school and their child's academics were finding it increasingly difficult to do in an environment which was constantly shifting. However, as this was a temporary and unique situation, all three respondents felt these barriers would lessen or disappear and I will not be addressing these barriers in the strategies section.

### ***Strategies to Promote Parental Engagement and School Involvement***

The first and ultimately most important strategy for engaging parents in education is creating a school culture of community and trust. All three respondents voiced the paramount need for a principal to be an active member of their community. Examples included

participating in community events and making yourself available to parents and being an active listener to the needs of not only parents but the community as well. Parents need to see you as part of the community and trust you have their child's interests at heart. This was particularly true when dealing with minority groups. A sense of trust in the school and the school's leadership must be established before parents will engage. Clear communication of the school's mission and goals was viewed as necessary to create a sense of common purpose.

A second strategy outlined by all three respondents was creating opportunities for both school involvement and parental engagement. This was particularly true for Mark but was also cited by both Brigitte and Sandra. All three agreed both school involvement and parental engagement were necessary for student success. In Mark's case, he outlined the need for school projects to get parents involved. He outlined the importance of creating "big projects" in which many parents could be involved in, and this involvement creates a positive outlook on the school. He pointed out this was not limited to parents, but the community as a whole would have more favourable views of the school if they saw parents involved in projects which ultimately improved the school and community. Through this involvement, parents would interact more with teachers and the foundation would be laid for collaboration on parental engagement in academics. At Sandra's school, a focus of having parents involved in specialized programming such as STEM and CTS courses was favoured over large school projects. Her engagement plan centred around listening to parent and student course requests and then using parents to help deliver the programming, all of course under the direction and supervision of teachers and administration.

While all three respondents saw the COVID-19 pandemic as creating a number of temporary barriers, Mark pointed out the barrier of time could be alleviated, at least partially,

through the use of technology. The pandemic, and the online learning which resulted from it, pushed principals and teachers to use technology in new and innovative ways. Mark outlined how parent meetings, a key part to engagement at his site, now use virtual meeting options to allow parents with full schedules to still take part and be involved with the school. All three respondents also commented in order to engage parents with full schedules it was critical to have flexibility in planning for both parent meetings and for opportunities to have students and parents engage in academics. Thinking outside the box when it came to meeting times and locations is viewed as necessary along with how and where those interactions happen.

For all three respondents, an effective strategy to engage minority group parents, particularly Indigenous parents, was through the use of liaison workers and culturally relevant activities. Brigitte outlined how she actively recruited a member of the Indigenous community in her school to act as a liaison between the parents and the school. A relationship of trust with this person had already been established with the parents and by using this position to communicate to and bring requests from parents, Brigitte was able to authentically address many of their needs and collaborate with the parents to create an all-important culture of trust. Mark also had a similar position in his school which focused on Indigenous student and family needs. In Sandra's case, part of her engagement plan involved offering culturally appropriate events as well as involving the school in community cultural events. It was her belief parents would view this as the school recognizing the importance of individual cultural values in her community and this, in turn, created trust in her parents with the school and her administration.

### ***The Importance of Parental Engagement***

It is not surprising all three respondents highlighted the importance of both school involvement and parental engagement in the overall success of students. Indeed, the literature on

the subject as outlined in the works of Jeynes (2018) support this belief. All three respondents outlined a variety of success stories where students showed marked improvement and overall success, both academically and social/emotionally, when parents were active participants in their education. When pressed for potential drawbacks to parental engagement, none of the respondents were able to indicate a common or real drawback to increased parental engagement.

Parental engagement should be part of any school's improvement planning. The need to create a clearly articulated plan was not only articulated in the respondents' answers but was also outlined in the literature. This plan should include a collaboratively agreed upon goal for parental involvement, opportunities outlining how and where parents will be engaged, and professional development opportunities for both parents and staff focussing both on an understanding of parental engagement and why it is necessary to the success of the school. The plan should also provide time for reflection and progression along Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum from involvement with the school, involvement in schooling, and ultimately to parental engagement in student academic success. School communities must have a clear understanding of where they are now and where they wish to go. Strategies to address local barriers, including those of Indigenous and minority groups, along with a clear communication plan, will round out this plan to successfully engage parents within the community.

### **Conclusions**

Conclusions emerging from the findings of this study, while not unique or contradictory to the research, confirm what the majority of the literature is already saying about parental engagement. While successful parental involvement and engagement across the continuum is highly contextual, certain fundamental aspects must be understood and implemented. These include a grounded understanding of involvement and engagement, the need to establish trust-

based contextual relationships with parents, understanding barriers and strategies for overcoming them, and effective implementation of plans to move a school division from involvement in schools to parental engagement in student academics.

### ***Involvement and Engagement***

Principals and teachers need to have a research-based understanding of the difference between school involvement and parental engagement and the benefits for students of having both in their schools. Parental engagement, while certainly the goal, is not meant to replace school involvement; both are necessary (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). A clear, division wide, understanding of the continuum from being involved with the school, to being involved in schooling, to engagement with student academics, must be implemented and embraced at all levels of leadership. This goes beyond the understanding of how but must extend into why parental engagement is necessary. School and divisional culture must reflect the belief education is not limited to the school and educational professionals. Parents and communities play a key role in any child's education and effective collaboration between school, parents, and communities should be understood, planned for, and embraced.

### ***Establishing Relationships and Trust***

Getting to know the parent community and understanding their needs, wants, and aspirations for their children's education is essential in effective parental engagement. Principals, and teachers, must be active and engaged members of the community and they must be seen as having the students' and community's best interests at heart. Creating a collaborative community, comprised of both parents and educational professionals, focused on student success, must be established. This must be based on trust, have a clearly defined direction, and be contextual to the community's needs. For many schools and classrooms, this will require a

shift in culture. Principals and teachers should be encouraged to be border crossers and to make schools more familycentric (Pushor, 2017). Schools and classrooms will need to be open and plan for parental participation and support. Planning and goal setting needs to involve parents and community stakeholders. This is particularly true of schools with Indigenous populations. A focused, data driven communication plan is essential to this along with creating meaningful opportunities for parents to be involved with the school. Addressing parent ability, desire, and confidence to assist in their child's academics must also be thoughtfully and purposefully planned for.

### ***Understanding and Sensitivity to Barriers***

When we understand the context in which we are working, when we truly know the parents and the community, the barriers naturally become evident. While there are unique barriers based on certain contexts, there are universal barriers principals need to be sensitive to and address. The first barrier is time. Parents and educators are busy, and time is often at a premium. Careful thought and consideration need to go into collaborative planning for parents and educators to meet, goal set, and reflect on what is being done and by whom. The need to address the availability of time for parents to engage in their child's education and the need to be flexible and work collaboratively with parents is also a priority for successful parental engagement.

Principals need to understand not all families will conceive of parental engagement in the same way (Goodall, 2013). There is often a difference between what is perceived by schools as parental engagement and what goes on in the homes of children. Many activities valued by families, and seen as part of parental engagement, are not recognized, or valued by schools (Conteh & Kawashima, 2008). Consensus between what the school views as parental

engagement and what the parents perceive must be addressed early in the process along the continuum to engagement. Effective principals and teachers who know their parents intimately and understand what they feel comfortable with when engaging in their children's academics are better positioned to capitalize on these goals and strengths.

Results from this study would also seem to confirm barriers addressed in the 2010 work Joyce Epstein. First, partnerships tend to decline across grades, particularly at the high school level. Principals and teachers should endeavour to develop and implement appropriate practices of partnership which reflect the needs and challenges of these higher grade levels. Principals and teachers in economically disadvantaged communities need to increase their efforts to build positive partnerships with parents and focus on positive accomplishments of students. Finally, in communities with higher instances of single parent families, parents who are employed outside the home, parents who live far from the school, and fathers who are less involved, schools need to organize more opportunities for families to volunteer at various times and in various places to support the school and their children.

Sensitivity to cultural needs and barriers in minority groups becoming engaged is also critical for any principal. Many Indigenous families are reluctant to engage with schools due to the impact of residential schools and the fact most schools do not celebrate or reflect their cultural values on any meaningful level (Steeves & Carr-Stewart, 2017). Use of cultural liaison workers and community driven cultural events were also noted as sound strategies for principals looking to engage minority parents. Understanding and addressing language barriers faced by many minority parents can be a daunting task for any leader. Ensuring communication plans are clear, creating a welcome environment for parents, and using community partners to ensure language barriers are minimized are sound initial strategies.

### ***Planning for Implementation***

Once the groundwork is laid for parental involvement, a clear and well articulated plan must be set in motion to move parents along the engagement continuum. Short- and long-term goals need to be set which capitalize on parental needs and strengths. Contextual barriers need to be clearly understood and strategies to address them laid out. A key factor is to provide time to collaboratively reflect upon progress made and include accountability measures to ensure what is planned for is indeed carried out. Finally, celebration of goals achieved must be included to provide a sense of ownership and accomplishment.

### **Recommendations**

The first recommendation from this study is to create a professional development plan for the Peace River School Division outlining: (a) the need for a culture of school involvement and parental engagement, and (b) an understanding of Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum of parental engagement as mentioned throughout this article. Before any school or division can embark on any improvement goal, it must be clear the goal is worth doing. We must first answer the question of why we should engage parents into areas which have been traditionally the sole realm of the teacher.

The second is to revise current PRSD policy and administrative procedures to implement long term plans at each site regarding parental engagement. These site-based plans need to be reflective of collaboratively reached goals, address contextual barriers, outline roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, and demonstrate effective communication strategies. These plans would fit very nicely with existing divisional, and site based three-year education plans and it should be simple enough to adapt these existing plans to include parental engagement goals and strategies. Accountability would be achieved by embedding checkpoints throughout the year

so parent communities and schools could reflect on their progress and revise plans as necessary. Including time for principals and divisional leaders to meet and share progress throughout the year would also be an essential component. A final key component to this change in policy and procedures will be celebrating success of accomplishments at both the school and divisional levels. These celebrations need to be contextual and culturally sensitive for them to have real value. Parents and schools need to see their efforts have been worth it and further progress along Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) continuum is achievable and desirable.

A further value of this study is it could lead to further research and collaboration at the divisional level. I think it would be very plausible to see the results of this study being used to drive further research in the PRSD to understand how school involvement and parental engagement are viewed throughout the division. There is a need to identify common barriers in all our schools and the proven strategies being used to overcome them. A focused, data-driven, long-term plan to address this would, in my opinion, have a positive impact not only on student achievement but on the community's value of education and a shift in the role of parents in education. A partnership with Holy Family Catholic Regional Division and Northland School Division would be a natural extension of this research and could lead to results which would have a meaningful addition to the academic research on this topic.

There are many in the field who would say education is at the brink of a paradigm shift. We have already seen education shift from being knowledge centred to being skill centred; it is no longer essential students know facts but rather they possess skills to prepare them for fields which may not yet exist. Technological advancements have now made it possible for students to learn what they want, when they want, and how they want. At a local level, we have seen this practically applied due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further to this, we have seen many parents,

students, and educators who not only view this as possible but desirable. There are models within North America and around the world where this shift in educational delivery is becoming the norm. Advancements in artificial intelligence and its applications in education are also being explored (Chen et al, 2020). The very role of the teacher may change due to these advancements. It will be critical for the PRSD not only to understand where we are along this paradigm shift, but to plan for it and critically examine the effects of such change. Further to this, the role of the parent in this new paradigm must be explored. In a new educational paradigm, which may have little resemblance to their own educational experience, parents will likely struggle with how to engage in their children's education. It will be imperative the division understand and effectively guide parent communities through this potential change.

Finally, as I mentioned at the outset of this paper, while most of the research states school involvement and parental engagement are associated with higher academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2018), there is little to no data conclusively showing higher academic outcomes are the direct result of increased parental engagement. The profession needs to study this assumption empirically using methods capable of establishing causality so a direct connection between increased parental engagement and improved academic results can be determined. While it is my opinion, and the opinion of many in the educational field, such a connection exists, without the data we are operating on an assumption of the existence of such a relationship.

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## Appendix A – Research Application

Research Application - Jeff Thompson

Title of Research: Supporting parent communities in northern Alberta rural elementary schools: transitioning from school involvement to parental engagement

Researcher: Kevin Munch

Who will be involved:

- Gail McNabb (principal) - Springfield Elementary
- Wade Johnson (principal) - T.A. Norris Middle School
- Sherri MacDowall (principal) - Hines Creek Composite
- Alternate: Jen Daniel (principal) - Worsley Central School

What will be researched: All of the above have been identified as principals with proven track records for effectively engaging their respective parent communities in PRSD. The goal is to identify what are effective and proven ways to engage parents in the learning process and what the potential impacts are with respect to student learning.

Where will the research be conducted: within PRSD - a northern Alberta school division with a mandate for engaging parents. Research will be conducted virtually.

How will the research be conducted / data collected: research will be conducted via a qualitative interview (virtual). All interviews will be done after work hours (will not interfere with regular teaching time) at a mutually agreed upon date and time. Participation is voluntary - agreement to participate will be acquired before interviews commence (should any of the above decline, I have other possible participants including Kim Matheson of Manning Elementary School and Jennifer Daniel of Worsley Central School).

Introduction letter, consent form, and interview questions have been attached.

## Appendix B – Research Request Approval Form



### Research Request Approval Form

**The Research Project Entitled:** Supporting parent communities in northern Alberta rural elementary schools - Kevin Munch

Has not been approved:

Has been approved:  *for the MED EDPS 509 course.*

Your request to conduct research in our division is approved subject to the conditions / requirements checked below:

1. A list of selected schools must be forwarded to my office before the research can begin.
  - 1a. The list of targeted schools has been received.
  2. Final approval to conduct this study will rest with the principal of each targeted school and the targeted group of teachers/students where applicable.
  3. Conducting the research will in no way negatively impact instructional time for students and teachers.
  4. Conducting this research must not put any burden of responsibility on our school administrators or other staff unless they specifically agree to it. Such agreement must not negatively impact instructional time.
  5. Participation in the study will be voluntary and participants will be able to opt out at any time without prejudice. This must be clearly communicated to the participants at the outset.
  6. For students under 16 years of age, the researcher must secure informed parental consent and confirm such consent with the principal before the research proceeds. Students 16 years of age and older must provide their own informed consent. Regardless of age, youth must be clearly informed from the outset that they may refuse to participate at any time, even if their parents consented to their participation.
  7. Anonymity of participants must be ensured.
  - \* 8. Before the research project can begin, it must receive final approval from your university's Research Ethics Committee and a copy of this approval must be sent to the Assistant Superintendent as per the contact information listed below. 
    - 8a. Ethics Committee approval letter has been received
    - 8b. Not applicable
  9. Given the inherent potential risk in this research project that some participants may relive a traumatic experience which can cause emotional or psychological stress, counseling services and other appropriate supports must be available during and subsequent to the data collection process.
  10. A copy of the research findings and resulting papers/reports must be directed to the Assistant Superintendent's office.
  11. Research results must be made available to the schools involved and to the individual participants who request them.
  12. The Peace River School Division takes no responsibility in conducting this research, and will not be held liable for any negative impacts relating to this research effort.
- \* *The U of A EDPS 509 course has received ethics approval for the MED students to conduct research. I have received a copy of the approval letter.*

Signature of Approval:   
 Jeff Thompson, PhD  
 Assistant Superintendent - Teaching & Learning

January 31, 2022

Date

Signature of Compliance: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Researcher

Date

A signed copy of this form **MUST** be returned to the address below and to the target schools before research can begin:

**Attention: Assistant Superintendent - Teaching & Learning**  
**Peace River School Division**  
 4702-51 Street Box 380  
 Grimshaw, AB T0H 1W0  
 thompsonj@prsd.ab.ca

## Appendix C – Letter of Introduction



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

### Letter of Introduction - Individual Interview - Adult Participation

Kevin Munch  
Graduate Student  
Educational Policy Studies  
9129 134 Avenue  
Peace River, AB T8S 1X2  
780-624-8644  
[munchk@prsd.ab.ca](mailto:munchk@prsd.ab.ca)

January 31, 2022

Respondent Name  
Respondent Address

Dear Respondent,

I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Educational Policy Studies program at the University of Alberta. The purpose of this letter is to request your participation in a research assignment for my EDPS 509 Research Design and Data Analysis course. My assignment is intended to identify ways in which northern rural principals foster and maintain effective and proven ways to engage parents in the learning process and what the potential impacts are with respect to student learning. Your participation would involve a one-hour interview conducted via Google Meet to discuss the ways in which you foster and maintain effective and proven ways to engage parents in the learning process and what the potential impacts are with respect to student learning. The interview questions will be emailed to you at least 24 hours prior to our interview time to allow you an opportunity to view them ahead of time. Your participation is voluntary; there will be no consequence to you should you decline to participate or decide to withdraw from participating.

In order to gather data for my research assignment, I will collect interview data and then code it deductively and inductively for emergent themes. The interview will be video recorded and transcribed. Please note:

- You may choose not to answer any question.

- You may opt out of this research assignment once responses have been submitted. To do so, please submit your request by email by March 31, 2022, and I will destroy all data.
- I will send you a transcription of the interview as well as a summary of the main points I understood you to make by email; you will have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcription and my interpretation of it.

All data will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants:

- Participant names will not be revealed. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used in all written representations of the data.
- Hard copy data will be locked in my file cabinet at my home office and will be destroyed on completion of my graduate program.
- Digital data will be stored on my personal computer under a secure password-protected system and will be destroyed on completion of my graduate program.
- Data will be used to complete my EDPS 509 course, my graduate program, and may be used in future presentations and publications in educational contexts.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate in my research. If you wish to participate, please sign the attached consent form and return it via email by February 1, 2022. I have included two copies of the consent form: one is to be signed by you and the other is for your own records.

The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, you can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Should you wish to receive a copy of my research findings, I would be pleased to provide one at your request.

Sincerely,

Kevin Munch  
Graduate Student in the Master of Education in Educational Policy Studies  
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta  
(780) 624-8644  
munchk@prsd.ab.ca

**Educational Policy Studies**

7-104 Education North • University of Alberta • Edmonton • Canada • T6G 2G5  
Telephone: (780) 492-7625 • Fax: (780) 492-2024

## Appendix D – Consent Form



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

### Adult Participation Consent Form

**EDPS 509 Research Assignment:** Supporting parent communities in northern Alberta rural elementary schools - transitioning from school involvement to parental engagement

**Researcher:** Kevin Munch

**Date Range of Research:** February 1, 2022 - February 28, 2022

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of participant), hereby consent to participate in the research, Supporting parent communities in northern Alberta rural elementary schools - transitioning from school involvement to parental engagement

I understand that my participation includes:

- a one-hour recorded interview via Google Meet with Kevin Munch

As per the Letter of Introduction, I understand that:

- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- I may opt out of this research assignment once responses have been submitted. To do so, please submit your request by email by March 31, 2022, and I will destroy all data..
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially.
- No identifying information will appear on written representations of the data: pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used to convey the data.
- The data will be used for the purposes of completion of the Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program and may be used in future presentations and publications in the educational context.
- The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, I can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix E – Interview Questions

Interview Topic - How do successful educational leaders foster and support parental engagement?

Interview questions:

1. How long have you been in a position where you have been responsible for parental engagement?  
Follow-up: Give a brief description of your experience in parental engagement?
2. Is there a difference, in your experience, between school involvement and parental engagement and if so, what are they?  
Follow-up: what does meaningful parental engagement look like at your site?
3. In your experience, what keeps parents from meaningfully engaging in their children's education?
4. If you were mentoring a new principal, ideally what advice would you give to successfully engage their parental community?  
Follow-up/Alternatively: What would an ideal situation for parental engagement look like?
5. When parents have meaningfully engaged in their child's education, what benefits have you observed for students at your site?  
Follow-up: what benefits has your school experienced by having an actively engaged parental community?  
How do you think this would translate to benefits for student learning?  
What, if any, are the drawbacks?

## **Appendix F – Consent E-mail**

Good afternoon [respondent],

I am reaching out to you to ask if you would be willing to be interviewed for my research project, which is focused on how principals effectively engage their parent communities. The interview will take about an hour, so if you do not have time or do not wish to participate, this is absolutely fine! I have attached all of the applicable documents as well as the list of interview questions, for you to read through and determine if this is something you would be interested in. If it is, please sign and return the consent form by Feb. 4th. If you have any questions or would like any additional information, please don't hesitate to ask.

## Appendix G – Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule - How do successful educational leaders foster and support parental engagement?

### Introduction:

The purpose of this interview is to gain a better understanding of how successful educational leaders, such as yourself, foster and support parental engagement. You have been chosen to be part of this research as you have been identified, by central administration, as a leader who understands the importance of parental engagement and possess strategies shown to have effectively engaged parents within your community. This interview should take no more than 1 hour to complete. At any time, you may stop the interview if you feel like you would like to no longer proceed. I'd like to thank you in advance for participation in this research. Please be advised this interview will be recorded, and all data will be stored and protected as per the introduction letter you have already received and reviewed. I am also using an electronic transcription service to transcribe what is being said. Do you have any questions before we begin, and do I have your consent to continue?

### Interview questions:

1. Background/Demographic (what is your experience with parental engagement?) - **How long have you been in a position where you have been responsible for parental engagement?**

Follow-up: Give a brief description of your experience in parental engagement?

2. Knowledge (what is your understanding of the issue?) - **What is the difference, in your experience, between school involvement and parental engagement?**

Follow-up: what does meaningful parental engagement look like at your site?

3. Experience (what gets in the way of success?) - **In your experience, what are the barriers to parents engaging with their child's studies?**

Follow-up: In your experience, how have you successfully engaged Indigenous parents (or other minority groups) both in being involved with the school and with their child's educational success?

4. Sensory (what does success look like) - **If you were mentoring a new principal, ideally what advice would you give to successfully engage their parental community?** (ie. what are effective strategies)

5. Opinion/Value (why is it important?) - **When parents have meaningfully engaged in their child's education, what benefits have you observed for students at your site?**

Follow-up: How do you think this would translate to benefits for student learning?

What, if any, are the drawbacks?

6. **Is there anything else with respect to parental engagement you would like to share with me?**

**Conclusion:**

Thank you again for your time and participation in this study. Once I have completed the transcription of this interview, I will forward you a copy to check for reliability. If you wouldn't mind, please read over it and make sure what has been recorded accurately reflects your responses.