



# Calgary School Safe Zones

Stakeholder Report Back: What We Heard  
2019 August 30

## Project overview

In 2019 April, Council passed the School Safe Zones Notice of Motion C2019-0446 which directed Administration to review exposure to harmful expression among children accessing schools. As part of this review Administration was directed to collaborate with school boards and school districts in Calgary to understand children’s exposure to harmful expression.

## Engagement overview

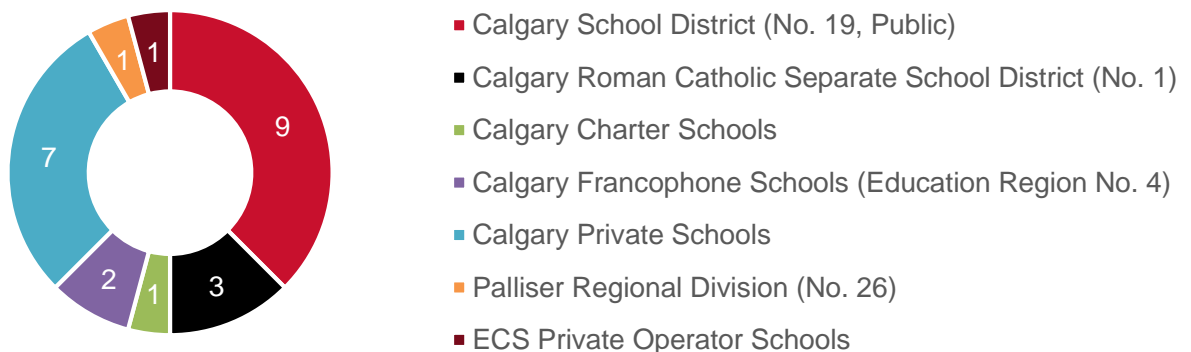
Throughout 2019 June, Administration reached out to the school boards and districts in Calgary via email and phone. This approach was chosen for the interviews for two reasons:

1. the school term was ending and this approach was the most accommodating to different schedules, and
2. a one-on-one conversation allowed Administration to gain an understanding of what school districts are experiencing while allowing for them to share the information without fear of judgment or need to defend their experience to others.

The project team sent out 136 emails requesting interviews. At least two follow-up emails were sent, and when there was a known incident at a school, three or more follow-up email requests were sent. We contacted representatives from the following seven school districts and divisions:

- Calgary School District (No. 19, Public)
- Calgary Roman Catholic Separate School District (No. 1)
- Calgary Charter Schools
- Calgary Francophone Schools (Education Region No. 4)
- Calgary Private Schools
- Palliser Regional Division (No. 26)
- Early Childhood Services (ECS) Private Operator Schools

Number of interviews per district/division





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### Who we interviewed

District/Division	Breakdown of interviews
Calgary School District (No. 19, Public)	1 – District Board Representative 8 – School Principals
Calgary Roman Catholic Separate School District (No. 1)	1 – District Board Representative 2 – School Principals
Calgary Charter Schools	1 – School Principal
Calgary Francophone Schools (Education Region No. 4)	2 – School Principals
Calgary Private Schools	7 – School Principals
Palliser Regional Division (No. 26)	1 – District Board Representative
ECS Private Operator Schools	1 – School Principal

This report is a summary of what we heard from these interviews. No verbatim transcripts were taken of the interviews and therefore this report is a summary of the key themes, examples and comments shared during the interviews. Additionally, there is a detailed summary of responses starting on [page 4](#).

### What we asked

The interviews followed the direction of the Notice of Motion and sought input from schools on their direct experience with harmful expressions within the vicinity of their schools. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. The Notice of Motion suggests harmful expression can interfere, bully, intimidate or offer hateful views. Do you agree with the terminology used in the Notice of Motion to describe harmful expression? Is there anything you would like to add, take away, or elaborate on?
2. Keeping the description in the previous question in mind, has your school experienced any type of harmful expression at or near the school?
  - a. If yes, where/when did it happen?
  - b. If yes, did you receive any complaints about it?
  - c. If yes, tell us a bit about the number and nature of the concerns. Please don't provide any information that would identify individuals.
3. What did you or the school do about the complaints or situation? How was the situation addressed?

The project team was also simultaneously working on research on the topic and asked for potential research topics stakeholders may suggest to ensure a fulsome understanding and a comprehensive analysis of the topic. The team also asked participants to identify other nearby schools that might have experiences to share, which identified 12 additional schools for engagement.

### What we heard

In total we conducted 24 interviews. The majority of the interviews were with school Principals and some with school district or board representatives.



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### Harmful expression definition

The Notice of Motion suggests harmful expression can interfere, bully, intimidate or offer hateful views. 19 participants agreed with the definition. Eight agreed and provided additions to the definition. These additional suggestions are summarized below:

- Make the definition broader, elaborate on the terms, and expand the zone to 100 metres to allow for safe bus access.
- Add different words including: frightening, segregation, shaming, provoking (antagonizing the kids into action), as well as include specific businesses (e.g. cannabis) in the zone.

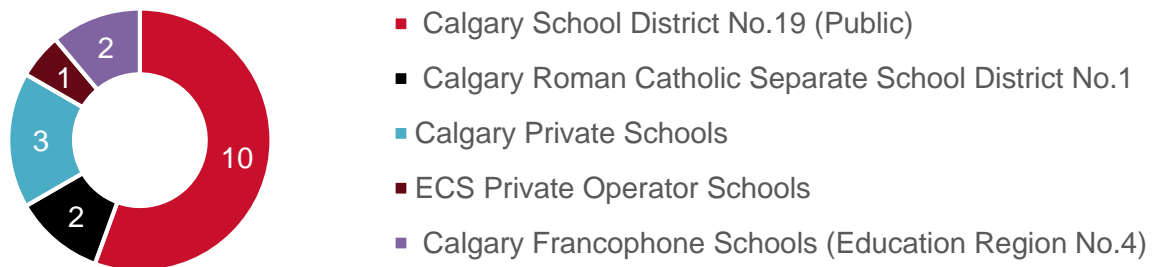
Three participants felt it important to consider freedom of expression and diversity of culture, religion, ideology, etc. Two explicitly stressed that the safe zones should not interfere with this freedom (Section 2 of the Charter), or the ability to host events and groups on school property.

### Experiences with harmful expression

18 interviews spoke to specific instances of harmful expressions and were from five of the seven districts.

Some of these instances took place on a regular basis, such as once a year or once a semester. These expressions were typically taking place directly in-front of the school but on public property (for instance, on a sidewalk immediately in front of the school). Detailed information on the location and frequency can be found on [page 5](#).

Number of schools that indicated an instance of harmful expression by school board/district



When asked about concerns, the schools heard concerns from parents, students, and staff. Most were upset and many had questions about why such displays/protests were allowed to take place directly in front of the school. Details on complaints and concerns are on [page 5](#).

Eight interview participants also talked about how students were being exposed to graphic images and antagonized. The students would sometimes argue with protesters, who they saw as disruptive, creating a negative atmosphere that was not ideal for the students in general. Three also talked about the impact of students being filmed by one specific group.

Six times we were told that students or staff who had experienced trauma, or who had been diagnosed with anxiety or depression were often affected by the protests for much longer and had experienced major



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setbacks at school. One participant specifically talked about the emotional maturity of a 16 year old whose lack of experience for handling these encounters required staff to provide extra care.

### School response

13 schools that experienced these instances were quick to act by addressing the issue with students directly. They would also send out communications regarding the incidents and involve school staff or the School Resource Officer who would stay near the protests to provide support to students.

Even though the schools were quick to act, they did share that events created a significant disruption and drained resources. They negatively impacted staff's day-to-day work and the students' learning experience. This was especially true if the event was unexpected, where the administration did not have advance notice from the School Resource Officer. While some schools received advanced notice, others did not. Schools also noted the impacts of the event were not just immediate. Following the event, providing emotional support to students and other staff required additional time, and students' school life and day-to-day learning was disrupted.

More specific details on the impact of incidents on school resources and people can be found on [page 6](#).

Eight participants specifically said that the protests were disruptive and resulted in complaints from the community, students, parents and staff. Another eight participants did not explicitly use the words disruptive but did talk about the negative impact on the school resources and that they too received complaints from parents and students. They used words like inflammatory, bullying, taunting, shocking, and distressing, and three schools received complaints asking "why are they allowed to do it outside our doors?" There were two participants that did not talk about the impact.

Regardless of the protest topic, participants noted that the protest incidents were disruptive to their daily school administrative work, negatively impacted students, and upset parents.

## What we heard - detailed summary

### Harmful expression definition

Theme	Detailed Summary
Agreement with the definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>19 participants agreed with the definition in the Notice of Motion.</li> <li>Three participants who agreed with the definition did struggle with how the terms are defined because they can be subjective and what is harmful or intimidating to one person may not be to another. They talked about parents also playing a part in deciding what is harmful.</li> </ul>
Improvements to the definition	<p>Eight agreed and provided additions to the definition. These additional suggestions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make the definition broader, elaborate on the terms, and expand the zone to 100 metres, or more to allow for safe bus access.</li> <li>Add additional words to the definition including: frightening, segregation, shaming, provoking (antagonizing the kids into action), as well as to add specific businesses (e.g. cannabis) into the safe school zone.</li> </ul>
Freedom of expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Three Participants noted that that it is important to consider freedom of expression and diversity of culture, religion, and ideology.</li> <li>Two stressed that the safe zones shouldn't interfere with this freedom, Section 2 of the Charter, or the ability to host events and groups on school property.</li> </ul>



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### Experiences with harmful expression

Theme	Detailed Summary
Location and frequency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seven of the schools have harmful expression incidents happen on a regular annual or bi-annual basis (either once a year or once a semester and all said it was by the same group).</li> <li>Nine of the schools have had regular instances over the last five to seven years.</li> <li>Remaining schools had less frequent instances happening only once in the last year or more than a year ago.</li> <li>Of the 18 noted incidents, six were on school property and the other 12 took place directly in front of the school but on public property, for example on a sidewalk immediately in front of the school.</li> </ul>
Describing the experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One example noted that students said they felt “violated” because they had to walk directly past the graphic signs to get into the school.</li> <li>Two examples that were not about protests involving graphic images had school administrators hearing the same types of complaints from parents. In one example, parents rallied to support a teacher who was experiencing a hard time and put notes and messages all over her car. Another example was a political protest event with messages on signs. In both instances the schools said that it was disruptive and parents and teachers felt bullied and intimidated.</li> <li>Overall regardless of whether the message was graphic or not, the schools said that that there was a negative impact to people and that it negatively impacted the schools “social cohesion.”</li> </ul>
Complaints and concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All but one protest incident received complaints through the schools.</li> <li>The schools heard concerns from community neighbours and business, parents, students, and staff.</li> <li>All concerns were negative. Specifically those who complained were frustrated about the very graphic images by one group of protestors.</li> <li>The complaints found the incidents emotionally upsetting and most had questions about why such displays/protests were allowed to take place directly in front of the school.</li> <li>Parents specifically asked schools why they had allowed these protests to happen.</li> <li>Schools also received complaints about the imagery, the aggressive verbal engagement, and inflammatory comments used as a tactic by a group to solicit interactions/reactions.</li> <li>As noted some also received complaints about the inability of students to get into the school without exposure to the images.</li> <li>One school noted that because of smaller class sizes they were better able to address issues with students as things were happening.</li> <li>Others had concerns about their ability to do day-to-day work as well the ability to answer parents’ questions, and mitigate potential desire by parents to intervene, in the protests.</li> </ul>



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### School response

Theme	Detailed Summary
Addressing the events with students and parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools that experienced these instances were quick to act and would address the issue with students directly.</li> <li>• Six schools send out communications to parents regarding the incidents.</li> <li>• Five schools have to involve other school staff (guidance counselors, School Resource Officer, teachers, etc.) who would stay near the protests to provide support to students.</li> <li>• Three schools also noted follow-up calls and meetings with students and parents.</li> <li>• Two schools noted that they have the ability to handle their responses for events in school but need additional support, specifically from the School Resource Officer, for anything that happens outside of their property.</li> </ul>
Impact of incidents: on school resources and people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Even though the schools were quick to action, they did share that when the events happened they were a significant disruption and resource drain.</li> <li>• Events impacted the day-to-day operations for staff as well as experience for staff and students.</li> <li>• There was more impact to the schools if the event was unexpected, where the school administration did not have advance warning from the School Resource Officer.</li> <li>• There was mixed experiences of advance warning, some schools were notified in advanced and others were not.</li> <li>• Eight schools also noted that the impact of the event were not just immediate. It had later impacts on administration time, student emotional support and personal needs, and the impact on students and the disruption to their day-to-day.</li> <li>• It was mentioned that students and staff who have had trauma in their lives, diagnosed level of anxiety, or depression are often affected by the protests for much longer and have experienced major setbacks.</li> <li>• Eight participants talked about how students were being exposed to graphic images, being antagonized, and that the students sometimes would argue with the protesters.</li> <li>• Eight participants saw these instances as particularly disruptive, creating a negative atmosphere overall and negative emotional impacts on both staff and students.</li> </ul>

Interview participants were provided with this report via email on 2019 September 6 thanking them for their participation and informing them that it would be included as an attachment to the report to SPC on Community and Protective Services on 2019 November 13.