

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

April 16, 2002

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Inclusive Education Committee

ORIGINATOR: M. de Man, Department Head

RESOURCE

STAFF: Gloria Chalmers, John Edey, Manfred Malzahn, Neil Robblee

INFORMATION

Background: At the May 8, 2001 board meeting, a delegation from the Edmonton Regional Coalition for Inclusive Education made a presentation that included a number of requests (Appendix I). At the May 22, 2001 board meeting the administration responded with several recommendations. One of the recommendations approved by the board was that “a committee be struck of parents with children with special needs including representation from the Edmonton Regional Coalition for Inclusive Education, community partners and district staff to review obstacles and best practices of inclusion.” At the June 19, 2001 board meeting, as a follow-up to the recommendation, the administration provided information on the committee’s terms of reference, membership, and proposed time lines.

The committee is composed of the following representatives: Paul Leung and Paul Kohl, Edmonton Regional Coalition for Inclusive Education; David Laughton, Edmonton Association for Bright Children; June McCrone Jenkins, Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta; Linda Cundy and Diane Underschultz, Edmonton Association of the Deaf; Wendy McDonald, Alberta Association for Community Living. It also includes one principal from a school and one principal from Leadership Services, and is chaired by two staff from Central Services.

At the first meeting of the committee held on September 26, 2001, the terms of reference and the timelines were reviewed. With minor adjustments, they were accepted by consensus (Appendix II). The committee understands that the district sees itself as a district of choice and provides a range of placement options for students with special needs but that the focus of this committee was inclusion. From the perspective of the Edmonton Regional Coalition, inclusion is not a special education program but rather the preferred way of educating any student. It was acknowledged that the nature of the inclusive program varies depending upon the special needs of the student.

Committee Process: To provide stakeholders with an opportunity for input and to keep that input focused on the mandate of the committee, a decision was made to develop four questions as the basis for the input and to require that all input be in writing. The questions were:

1. What practices are effective in supporting inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms?
2. What are the barriers to inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms?
3. What could schools do differently to make inclusion a more realistic choice for parents and students?
4. What could the school district do to support schools in their efforts to include students with special needs in regular classrooms?

All organizations represented on the committee, as well as other organizations with an interest in education of students with special needs, parents and district staff were invited to respond to the questions. The organizations that responded were:

- Alberta Association for Community Living
- Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 3550 (Edmonton Public Schools support staff)
- Community Options
- Edmonton Association for Bright Children
- Edmonton Association of the Deaf
- Edmonton Autism Society
- Edmonton Regional Coalition for Inclusive Education
- Families for Effective Autism Treatment
- Getting Ready for Inclusion Today
- Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta

Submissions were also received from parents, principals, teachers and other district staff.

Input Received and Recommendations Made: The consultation process was designed to obtain qualitative input from both recipients and providers of service. Views and suggestions varied among and within stakeholder groups, but several persistent themes emerged quite clearly and a number of barriers were identified. A set of recommendations has been developed to address these. In recognition of the financial constraints imposed on the district, the recommendations, while based on the input received, do not address the full range of suggestions that were made. While the committee believes that most of the proposals would involve little or no additional costs to the district, it believes that some are of sufficient importance to warrant additional funding. It is also recognized that the district has some systems and practices that are supportive of inclusion. Input received supports the continuation of such practices and suggests that an increase in some of these areas is required.

Outlined below are the themes or barriers and a summary of input received, related recommendations, and some existing relevant district practices.

Theme 1 – Attitudes: Not negating that some groups and individuals have positive attitudes toward inclusion, all stakeholder groups agreed that negative attitudes toward inclusion and beliefs about students with special needs are barriers to inclusion. There is recognition that changing attitudes is a gradual process that must be addressed on a number of fronts.

Recommendation – Address attitudes: Because attitudes are affected by actions and strategies that increase awareness, improve expertise, and provide adequate support and resources, this area needs to be addressed on a number of fronts simultaneously:

- Ongoing review of district communications to ensure that inclusion is presented as a valued choice within Edmonton Public Schools
- Use community expertise to assist in identifying needs and opportunities
- Communications about the district's Blueprints initiative will reinforce the fact that it is intended to meet the needs of all students in a school
- Offering a Blueprints session focusing on inclusion
- Offering a leadership institute on inclusive education
- Continue to provide support to all principals in their efforts to include students
- Ongoing review of district communications to ensure that a cross-section of students is depicted positively and inclusively, in terms of disabilities, ethnicity, gender, etc.
- Formal recognition of individuals and staffs that demonstrate best practices related to inclusion
- Professional development and inservices for district staff will continue to be provided and will include more options related to inclusive education practices

Current situation: New Teacher Institutes, held two times a year, address topics related to special needs. Differentiation of instruction, classroom management and a presentation by students with special needs are the sessions that directly address students with special needs in the new teacher institutes. Feedback forms consistently indicate that the student-led presentations have a powerful impact on the new teachers.

Theme 2 -- Commitment: Stakeholders generally agree that commitment is a prerequisite to improving the inclusive education option. Most parents and some of the organizations that provided input feel that district leadership should state more clearly their commitment to making inclusion more accessible, and take steps accordingly. Parents have indicated that inclusion is not as accessible as the policy would indicate. Some organizations, principals and staff indicated that commitment to inclusion should not be at the expense of other options.

The district policy, HA.BP Student Programs, states “The board supports the concept of providing educational programs for students with special needs in both neighbourhood schools and in district centres. The neighbourhood school is a guaranteed point of entry for all students, and the regular classroom shall be the first option considered. District centres provide alternate program options.” This is consistent with Alberta Learning’s policy which states that “Educating students with special needs in regular classrooms in neighbourhood or local schools shall be the first placement option considered by school boards, in consultation with students, parents/guardians and school staff.”

Recommendation -- Inclusive Education Contact: This proposal involves the designation, on an ongoing basis, of a staff member in Leadership Services to carry out a number of functions. The individual would require knowledge and training in the area of inclusive education. Responsibilities would include:

- Provide support to schools in their efforts to accommodate students in inclusive settings

- Serve as a point of contact for principals and parents who need information and advice regarding inclusive education
- Advise the superintendent on strategies to make inclusive education more accessible
- Co-ordinate leadership professional development related to inclusion
- Make available relevant research
- Encourage communication among stakeholders
- Facilitate ongoing dialogue with the community regarding implementation of the recommendations in this report
- Participation in policy review

The intent of the Inclusive Education Contact would not be to duplicate functions already carried out by others, but to ensure that information, services and support are accessible and effective.

Current situation: School principals have the primary responsibility for informing parents of placement and programming options with assistance from Leadership Services when required.

Theme 3 -- Funding: All stakeholders are aware that funding levels affect programming for all, including inclusive classroom placements. Principals have the responsibility to consider inclusion as the first option even when financial resources are limited but they also stress that inclusion would be enhanced if schools were able to hire more staff, purchase more services and maintain smaller learning groups. There is a desire to see the board of trustees continue to advocate for adequate funding. At the same time, the view was expressed that the district's basis of allocating funds to schools appears to favour special needs district centres over inclusive placements. Three examples are:

- Strategies district centres receive additive funding for students with learning disabilities, while other schools are expected to meet these students' needs without those extra resources
- District centres are guaranteed a minimum number of student allocations so that the program can be delivered even if the number of students is small
- Most schools do not have the economies of scale found in district centres

Recommendation -- Review the basis of allocation: The administration will review funding mechanisms of this kind with the intent that there be equity.

Current situation: The board of trustees continues to make a case to the provincial government for funding that meets the needs of all students. The basis of allocation, which determines how funds are provided to schools, is reviewed annually by the administration and the board to ensure that competing needs are addressed equitably and consistently.

Theme 4 – Collaboration: All stakeholders agree that parent involvement is necessary when programming decisions are made about individual children, and that specialist expertise and services may need to be brought in. Parents want to be valued partners, on an ongoing basis, in the education of their children. Suggestions were also received about ways of strengthening partnerships between the district, community organizations and parents at a more general level.

Recommendation – Develop an inclusive education brochure: As the district has been in the process of developing brochures on a number of district centre programs, it is recommended that a brochure for parents be produced, with community input, explaining how to proceed if they wish to explore inclusion.

Current situation: There is an expectation that parents will be involved in placement and programming decisions affecting their children. Involvement of outside organizations in district-level planning and decision-making already occurs on an as-needed basis.

Theme 5 – Staff: Concern was expressed about challenges faced by staff when expectations exceed training and experience. There was general agreement that many teachers feel they do not have sufficient training and expertise in the area of special needs and inclusive education, that this should be a consideration in the provision of professional development and in recruitment, and that appropriate supports need to be available. Some concern was also expressed about a shortage of appropriately trained teacher assistants and sign language interpreters.

Recommendation – Identify, develop and share best practices: Staff, administrators and community organizations have a wealth of knowledge about practices that support inclusion, and there is a large body of literature on the subject. The Inclusive Education Committee believes that there is a need for more sharing of this information. The administration will use a variety of mechanisms for addressing this.

Recommendation – Increase the pool of qualified teacher assistants and sign language interpreters: The administration is initiating discussions with Grant MacEwan College to assist the college in identifying training needs for teacher assistants and sign language interpreters. If required, similar discussions would take place with other institutions.

Recommendation – Preservice and inservice training of teachers and other staff: To increase expertise in inclusive education at both the district and the school level, the administration will work with the universities on preparing new teachers to meet diverse needs of students in the regular classroom, with colleges regarding various training programs and with consulting services to ensure broad expertise is available. As well, the district will inform district staff of courses or programs on inclusive education provided by other groups, and availability of community resource people who could participate in professional development days.

Current situation: Training programs for leadership staff, including those interested in obtaining a principalship, introduce participants to topics related to special needs, including the placement process and interagency involvement.

Recruitment of new teachers with special education training or experience is ongoing. Approximately 10 per cent of Edmonton Public Schools' teacher applicants are considered applicants in the area of special needs. This includes teachers with directly related experience and recent university graduates with course studies ranging from psychology to a minor in special education. The University of Alberta Faculty of Education only graduates

50 to 100 such students, or from five to 11 per cent in any given year. This demonstrates that the district is successful in recruiting them, but the pool may be too small.

Consultants provide a range of services, including assessment of students' educational and service needs, design of programming, assistance with Individual Program Plans, recommendations for resources and specialized equipment, and transition planning. These services are available for purchase by the schools from the schools' allocated resources.

Inservices for teachers and other staff are provided by Consulting Services on a cost recovery basis. Some are delivered at the school level in response to specific requests. Others are advertised and open to all district staff, and are designed to teach particular techniques and strategies, to help staff become familiar with new developments, and to increase awareness of issues relevant to educational programming for students with special needs.

Long-term professional improvement leaves for staff are granted on the basis of several criteria, one of which is potential benefit in terms of accommodating students with special needs.

Curriculum, instructional resources and assessment tools are available to schools. At this time several critical learnings documents are being piloted.

Availability of qualified sign language interpreters is an issue. Recruitment of staff with varying levels of expertise is ongoing. Interpreters must have the equivalent of the two-year interpreter program at Grant MacEwan College. Numerous teacher assistants have American Sign Language skills at various levels from 1 to 5.

Theme 6 – Information for decision-making: Stakeholders agree that sound decisions about district policy and practices can only be made if good information is available. A number of information gaps were identified, such as:

- Numbers of students in inclusive, partially inclusive, and segregated settings
- Type of accommodations being made when students are included
- Parent concerns – frequency, type, outcome
- Students' academic gains and social gains in various types of settings.

Recommendation -- Monitoring of issues: The administration will undertake a process of clarifying the types of information that would be helpful, identifying existing sources where possible, considering options for obtaining new information, and making relevant information available to those who need it.

Current situation: Efforts to find the appropriate balance between dedication of resources directly to the classroom, and to other needs including the gathering of information, are continuous in Edmonton Public Schools. The challenge is to refine the gathering of information so that it is efficient and relevant to student needs. For example, the district's satisfaction surveys provide information on how parents of students with special needs feel about their children's schooling, but the information is not sufficiently detailed to indicate the kind of setting the child is in. As well, principals are given information annually on students residing in their attendance area, including school attended, grade, and eligibility category.

All Themes – Committee members believe that a mechanism for reporting on progress regarding the various recommendations must be built in.

Recommendation – Report back to public board in a year's time: The administration, with community input, will bring a report to board by March of 2003 regarding the implementation of the recommendations in this report.

GC/MM:gc/mm

APPENDIX I: May 8, 2001 Edmonton Regional Coalition for Inclusive Education –
Presentation to EPS Board of Trustees
APPENDIX II : Inclusive Education Committee Terms of Reference

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Background

On May 8, 2001 the Edmonton Regional Coalition for Inclusive Education made a presentation to the Edmonton Public School Board about inclusive education and requested that the board develop a new policy supporting inclusion of all students. On May 22, the board considered the request and approved the establishment of a committee to “review obstacles and best practices of inclusion.”

Purpose

The committee’s purpose is to address the inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms, including:

- identifying effective practices
- identifying obstacles
- identifying supports
- reviewing relevant district policy, and
- reporting findings and recommendations to the board of trustees

Organization

The following groups have been invited to designate parents of students with special needs to participate on the committee:

- Edmonton Regional Coalition for Inclusive Education
- Alberta Association for Bright Children
- Learning Disabilities Association
- Edmonton Association of the Deaf
- Alberta Association for Community Living

In addition, there will be a principal and a staff member from the district’s leadership services group. The committee will be co-chaired by two staff with expertise in program development, student accommodation and policy development.

Consultation

The committee will gather information from a variety of sources. Various stakeholders and advocacy groups, to be identified by the committee, will be consulted. As well, district parents and staff will be notified of the process and opportunities for input.

Tasks and schedule

An outline of the committee’s work and the project schedule are as follows:

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| September 2001 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm membership of the committee • Finalize terms of reference • Prepare a detailed project schedule • Make a consultation plan |
| September to November 2001 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify the issues • Obtain input from stakeholders • Compile information |
| November 2001 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify possible solutions and evaluate them |
| January 2002 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report to the board of trustees |

The proposed schedule is based on the desire to provide sufficient time for:

- stakeholders to be heard
- relevant information to be compiled, and
- information to be provided to the board prior to the next budget cycle