

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: E. Schmidt, Acting Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Aboriginal Education: Current Context

ORIGINATOR: D. Barrett, Executive Director

RESOURCE

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INFORMATION

This report provides a context for discussion regarding Aboriginal Education based on the district's work in the past and currently, in addition to proposed plans for the future.

Background/Context: In the early nineties, district staff began to meet regularly with members of the Aboriginal community both from within the city and in various parts of the province. This approach, with a few interruptions, has continued until today.

Based on these consultations and internal discussions, a May 1991 board report outlined a plan indicating that all staff have responsibilities related to the education of Aboriginal students in the district. It is not exclusively the work of only one decision unit or Aboriginal staff. This approach continues to guide district work. Additionally, the plan incorporated the Aboriginal community request that the district enable self-identification of Aboriginal students for programming purposes. Thus, since February 1992 the district has included such a question on district registration forms, predating by a decade the province's requirement that this be done. The commitment made by the district to the Aboriginal community was that any data generated as a result of this identification would be used exclusively for programming purposes, to guide the work, and would not be made available publicly. The Aboriginal community trusted us sufficiently on behalf of their children to enable us to put in place a process of monitoring our success with their children.

In 1991-92, 2,160 Aboriginal students chose to self-identify and this school year there are 6,687 self-identified Aboriginal students. This increase is consistent with the demographics provided in the census. The census indicates that in 1996, there were 25,285 people in Edmonton who identified themselves as Aboriginal which includes North American Indians, Metis and Inuit. In 2001, this had increased to over 30,000 Aboriginal people. Also, there were over 40,215 Edmontonians who indicated that they had Aboriginal ancestry. Census projections indicate that by 2017, the Aboriginal population in Edmonton could increase by 45 per cent and reach 44,000.

The majority of self-identified Aboriginal students are served in community schools. This year 554 students or 9 per cent attend Aboriginal alternative programs and this has been fairly consistent from year to year.

Current Practice: As indicated in the district priorities, the district remains committed to strengthening program delivery for Aboriginal students. A brief overview of actions and initiatives in the district demonstrates how Aboriginal education permeates the work of the district. The work is by necessity collaborative and interrelated but described below in relation to the decision unit that has lead responsibility. A sample of current work follows:

- **Aboriginal Education** teacher consultants provide assistance to principals and teachers in the classroom regarding effective practices, strategies and resources; support central decision units in identifying appropriate practices and in better understanding the cultural context; and participate in internal and external committees. Inservice modules on the education of Aboriginal students are offered centrally to all district staff. An Aboriginal social worker assists in linking schools, parents and community and enabling effective communication. Liaison workers also help bridge home-school communications and provide referrals to community agencies.
- **Student Achievement Services**, in their leadership of district-wide professional development and improvement of student achievement, incorporate Aboriginal education in all their work. By requiring schools to identify and have a plan to assist students performing below grade level on the Highest Level of Achievement Tests in reading and writing or who are at risk of not completing their schooling, they also provide targeted support to these students.
- **Leadership Services** has an attendance committee that is working with individuals, including Aboriginal students, and with a group of schools whose attendance is lower than the district average. A pilot project for improving school attendance will soon be underway. The work in community conferencing also involves Aboriginal students.
- The **Curriculum** unit had the lead in a provincial project to infuse Aboriginal outcomes throughout the core curriculum and is involved in a pilot of these materials. As well, it is inservicing division I teachers on the new social studies curriculum which does include an Aboriginal focus. Curriculum has also developed for the district and the province Cree Language and Culture Curriculum and is involved in inservicing teachers in the district and in a number of rural areas. The unit maintains its links with Aboriginal groups throughout the province. Work has also been done to enhance transitions to post-secondary school and to employment through Registered Apprenticeship, Youth Apprenticeship and Workplace showcase.
- **Student Assessment** provides data to schools and central decision units to enable them to continuously modify and adapt programming and services to improve student achievement.
- The **Programs** unit developed and continues to support Aboriginal alternative programs. It provides programming information to schools and has developed and continues to develop partnerships with Aboriginal agencies in the community that augment services to schools. The unit coordinates external Aboriginal and Cultural Diversity advisory committees. There is Aboriginal representation on the district's external Cultural Diversity committee.
- **Student Information Services** provides information about the distribution of Aboriginal students in the district enabling the district to distribute funding but, more importantly, to

support schools with similar populations and staff from central services to work collaboratively. At this time, schools serving over 15 per cent self-identified Aboriginal students receive a First Nations, Metis, Inuit (FNMI) budget allocation.

- **Personnel Staffing** has enabled prospective staff to specifically indicate interest in Aboriginal programming. The consultants meet with district Aboriginal staff regarding means of improving recruitment and retention of Aboriginal staff. This spring staff from Personnel will meet with Aboriginal students at the University of Alberta.
- **Research and Resource Development** provide literature reviews (e.g., *Aboriginal Education: Key Ideas from Research*) and resources, (including maintenance of the Aboriginal collection on-line) to assist district personnel in identifying effective research-based strategies and resources.
- **Awasis and Amiskwaciy** not only provide an alternative option for students in the city but the expertise developed by the principals and staff in these schools is being shared with other schools and central services. Both these schools address the spiritual, the academic, and the emotional and physical needs of the students they serve. Because of their wholistic approach, they also emphasize collaboration with parents.
- The **City Centre Education Project (CCEP)** similarly involves the community and families in the education process. What they have learned about effective instructional practices and collaboration is shared and contributes significantly to school and district practice. CCEP has an Aboriginal cultural facilitator who works with teachers, students and parents to increase awareness, understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal culture and values. As well, the project has a dedicated Aboriginal coach who builds relationships with students to support them with their schooling and to encourage them to stay in school.
- **Other schools** with significant self-identified Aboriginal student populations (e.g., Brightview, Callingwood, and Westmount) have requested ongoing inservice support from Aboriginal Education consultants to increase their knowledge and skills in embedding Aboriginal content and perspectives in their work with students and parents.

This year it was recognized that the work has grown and expanded to such an extent that it was necessary to establish an internal Aboriginal Education committee consisting of school and central services staff from various decision units to improve communication, to minimize duplication and to move towards a long-term, coordinated plan for Aboriginal Education in the district. This committee has met several times this year and has brought two reports to Superintendent's Council for both information and feedback. It will continue to do so.

As well, an external Aboriginal Advisory Committee composed of Aboriginal agencies and organizations was reinstated. Preliminary feedback from this external group identified the following areas for further action:

- **assessment tools and practices:** The validity of tools used to assess students and the interpretation of the findings are questioned, particularly with regard to assessment of special needs (e.g., psychological and behaviour testing).
- **understanding of the Aboriginal community:** Questions about how well the non-Aboriginal community recognizes the diversity of the Aboriginal community and their ability to understand and take into consideration contextual factors were raised.
- **programming practices and supports:** The importance of early education programming, including Aboriginal specific headstarts and daycares, wholistic teaching practices and collaborative efforts that enable a broader range of supports were emphasized.

- relationships: The importance of developing and maintaining strong, trusting long-term relationships between the district and the Aboriginal community was underscored. The district and schools need to have good relationships with Elders, parents and service providers.

The district is committed to meeting with this advisory group on an on-going basis and to tackle the issues identified.

District analysis of achievement data for programming purposes indicates that there have been substantial increases in the percentages of Aboriginal students reading and writing at grade level and that there have been substantial gains in the percentages of Aboriginal students meeting the acceptable standard on provincial achievement tests, although results for this group of students are still lower than district results overall. This information, along with information from our schools, central services units and our external committee, demonstrates that we are having some success but that we have to continue and intensify this work.

Next Steps: It is anticipated that the internal Aboriginal Education committee, informed by feedback from the external Aboriginal Education committee and school feedback through Superintendent's Council, will be in a position by the end of this school year to develop a preliminary plan that would coordinate and integrate the work across the district and would provide direction for the next several years. Such a plan would need to be broadly vetted internally and externally, including with Elders, and thus would also serve as a means of extending the dialogue among all stakeholders. As this work progresses, information update reports on Aboriginal Education will be brought to board.

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