

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

March 11, 2003

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Random Selection Process Review

ORIGINATOR: A. Habinski, Executive Director School and District Services

RESOURCE

STAFF: Jenise Bidulock, Randy Leal, Robert Craig, Deanne Patsula, Seth Crook

INFORMATION

Purpose

This report will inform the board of the results of a review of the random selection process recently completed by the administration. The random selection process is the means which student space is allocated within district schools where demand has exceeded capacity.

Background

In June, 2002, the board heard a delegation regarding the district's random selection process. At the September 10, 2002 board meeting, trustees approved the administration's recommendation "That the request of the delegation that the random selection policy be reviewed be approved." The administration proposed that the review would involve input from key communicators, principals and community members and that it would include a review of practices in other jurisdictions.

The random selection process was implemented in 1994. At that time, input from principals and parents confirmed that it was the preferred means of allocating available student space. Previously, the practice of admitting students on a "first come first served" basis had caused considerable difficulty for parents, students and district administration.

Currently, fifty-seven schools within the district have enrolment limits. Schools with enrolment limits that are over-subscribed in any given year are required to conduct a random selection to determine which students from outside their attendance area will be admitted. Schools may elect to conduct a random selection on their own or centrally through Student Information. While the number of schools electing to do their own random selection is not reported, six to eight schools have been engaging the services of Student Information each year for the past several years.

Practices in Other Jurisdictions

A review of practices in other jurisdictions within Alberta revealed several different approaches to the placement of students. Some districts base their primary selection criteria on religion and then rely on attendance area boundaries. Some have boundaries which are

fluid and place students on a “first come first served” basis. In other districts, enrolment of students from outside an attendance area depends upon a recommendation from their principal.

Review Process

The administration’s commitment to broad consultation was met by involving, in the review process, parents and principals from throughout the district along with parents from the Mary Butterworth attendance area, including the delegation. A representative group of key communicators, principals and community members was contacted and invited to attend a meeting. Attendees at the meeting were consulted with the specific goal of providing input that would reflect both the favourable aspects of the process (i.e. what is working?) and what tends to be viewed more critically (i.e. what are some of the common concerns?).

Analysis

The “fairness” of the process was viewed as being its greatest attribute. The group generally agreed that, with a process that is truly random, all children have the same odds of obtaining a space in a school of their choice. There was also general agreement that it was the fairest system available and that basing the process on a student’s individual merit (e.g. level of achievement) was inconsistent with the district’s original intent of employing a process that is not in any way stratified. There was common agreement among group members that the random selection process was better than the “first come first served” approach.

The group’s discussion around concerns touched upon the following issues:

A. Communications

The concern most commonly shared by group members was the issue of communications. The group agreed that it would be of benefit to improve communications administratively through the pre-enrolment process and organizationally through schools and staff. Concerns were raised about the need for greater clarity, especially for out-of-boundary students, regarding enrolment caps, out-of-boundary access and the process itself. It was noted that the information needed by parents tends to be “site dependant”, that information should be available at “feeder schools” and that, generally, information needs to be advertised more efficiently.

B. Attendance Boundaries

There were no commonly held views with respect to the issue of attendance area boundaries. Attendance area boundaries are a critical consideration in the work that the administration does in the accommodation of students whether it is for the purpose of addressing the needs of programming distribution, space utilization or any other needs. Over time, needs in these areas change constantly throughout the district and, as a consequence, attendance area boundaries fall under regular review by the administration. In this ongoing work, additional consideration to the impact of boundaries on random selection might alleviate some of the concerns that were raised.

C. Process Consistency

There was common agreement that the application of the random selection process needs to be consistent across the district. In order to protect the transparency of the random selection process, the group indicated that all schools must deal with it in the same manner. There should be no reason for the process to be viewed as being inconsistent or anything other than fair and equitable to all.

D. Selection Criteria

While there was general consensus that basing selection on individual merit or on some other measure (e.g. achievement) is not a fair and equitable approach in the determination of a student's access to a school, two members of the group disagreed. They voiced the opinion that "logical and objective" criteria should be used to allocate space. The discussion, however, did not reveal any options in this regard that did not have the effect of stratifying the process. In other words, the group could not agree that using any criteria to differentiate between students was equitable.

E. Issues of Personal Concern

The group shared the significant concern that different outcomes for students involved in a random selection process can result in peer groups being split up as students make the transition from elementary to junior high school in particular. One member of the consultation group noted that school administrators "need to understand the life altering effects random selection has on students' lives". Discussion among group members acknowledged that this as an ongoing issue.

Conclusion

To the greatest extent possible, the district's random selection process is intended to treat all out-of-boundary applicants in a manner that is both fair and equitable. Over the years, random selection has served the district well and, generally, support for the process has been positive.

The administration regards the random selection process as a key element in the pre-enrolment process. Clearly, improvements can be made in terms of the district's common application of the process, particularly in the area of communicating information specific to the process. The considerable progress made from year to year in improving the pre-enrolment process is a reflection of the significant effort that continues to be made by the administration in this regard.

Based on the input received from the representative group consulted with in this review and a comparative review of practices in other jurisdictions, the administration remains confident that the district is well served administratively by the process and that there continues to be general support for the process within the district.

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