

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

March 13, 2007

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Trustee D. Williams, Chair, Trustee Aboriginal Education Task Force
Trustee D. Colburn, Trustee Aboriginal Education Task Force
Trustee K. Gibson, Trustee Aboriginal Education Task Force

SUBJECT: Trustee Aboriginal Education Task Force: Second Interim Report

RESOURCE

STAFF: Donna Barrett, Gloria Chalmers, Lorna L'Hirondelle

INFORMATION

Background: On November 28, 2006, the Board of Trustees received an initial interim report from the Trustee Aboriginal Education Task Force. The report provided information on consultation completed, planned and anticipated. As well, it advised of the process being followed and the expenditures to date. Finally, it included a discussion and background paper on Aboriginal Education. This second interim report provides information on activities since November 28, 2006. It includes a summary of advice, suggestions and observations voiced by the groups and individuals who met with the task force and identifies next steps.

Activity Update: The Task Force has met with students and parents, as well as staff, at Amiskwaciy, parents and staff from the Awasis alternative program at Prince Charles, and students and staff at Rites of Passage, a program for junior high aged youth provided in partnership with the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society. In addition, the Task Force met with representatives of the Ben Calf Robe Society, the Red Road Healing Society and from non-Aboriginal community stakeholders. Stakeholders represented included Edmonton and Area Child and Family Services; Children's Mental Health and School/Pre-School Health Services of Capital Health; Early Childhood Measurement and Evaluation Resource and Community; University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families; Community Resources; Out-of-School Care and Child Friendly Edmonton of the City of Edmonton; United Way; Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and ABC Head Start.

An important milestone in the work of the Task Force was the meeting with Elders, the spiritual leaders of the Aboriginal community. The Task Force is committed to meeting with Elders as the work progresses to ensure that the work is well informed by their wisdom.

To date, the Task Force has spent approximately \$3,400 or about 28% of the allocated budget. The expenditures cover honorariums and tobacco for Elders, books as gifts, snacks and light meals at meetings and printing costs.

Brief Summary of Task Force Meetings: It is difficult to capture the richness of the discussions, the honesty of the sharing and the depth of knowledge of the people who met with the task force, but the following represents a sample of the suggestions, perceptions and observations provided. The recurrent message was that the status quo is unacceptable. To

meet the aspirations of the Aboriginal community for their children's success in school will require supportive policies and changes in practice. Although the feedback was not expressed in categories, the comments have been grouped under headings that elicited comments from virtually all discussion groups:

Values: Comments from the groups tended to be grounded in a set of beliefs that focused on valuing important aspects of Aboriginal culture and respecting Aboriginal peoples. For instance,

- Recognize the unique place of Aboriginal people in Canada
- recognize the importance of Elders
- have high academic expectations for Aboriginal students
- recognize the importance of relationships
- follow a holistic approach (whole child in context of family)
- recognize importance of spirituality (but recognize this is the domain of the Elders)
- support use of ceremonies
- permit use of Sweetgrass and practice of Smudging in the schools
- establish policies that reflect the Aboriginal way of knowing
- follow Aboriginal protocols
- recognize National Aboriginal Day
- consult with Aboriginal community on an on-going basis
- work from a strengths perspective rather than a deficit perspective
- commit to eradicating racism (staff and students)

Programs/Curriculum and Programming: Comments reflected support for programming that responded to the needs of Aboriginal children and youth rather than expecting these children and youth to fit the system. For instance,

- Value/provide congregated options (e.g., Rites of Passage, Awasis, Amiskwaciy)
- Adequately fund and support congregated options (e.g., Amiskwaciy)
- Ensure full range of courses offered in congregated options
- establish a Cree Bilingual program
- maintain small class sizes and full-day kindergarten
- increase early education programs (e.g. Aboriginal Head Start)
- infuse Aboriginal outcomes throughout the curriculum for all students
- ensure that infusion goes deeper than just food, dress, etc.
- provide sports, arts and cultural options
- provide more career information, career exploration and courses
- support Aboriginal collection on-line
- vary programming to respond to the different needs; some students are “hands-on” learners
- address the overall literacy issues
- recognize that school-culture is critical to the Aboriginal community and to enabling Aboriginal students feel connected to school (e.g., make Aboriginal families feel welcome at the school, show them respect; recognize Aboriginal students in school displays, employ Aboriginal staff, make use of Aboriginal mentors)
- establish an Aboriginal student support office in every high school

- provide catch up time for students who need - a transition program like they have at University to provide for those not quite ready for the next stage be it junior high or senior high
- recognize importance of, and difficulty of, involving families- providing a meal and babysitting (transportation if possible), making it less formal, involving whole family are strategies that help

Support Systems or Networks: The participants underscored the need for the district to recognize that many Aboriginal students are faced with issues related to poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse and life in group homes or foster homes. They also mentioned that housing, transportation and meeting other basic needs are pressing issues for many Aboriginal families. This led to discussions regarding the need to collaborate with others in the community to enable success in school. For instance,

- acknowledge that district can't do it alone
- realize that policy direction is required to give high priority to partnerships
- recognize the financial barriers faced by many Aboriginal families that impede participation in school (e.g., for transportation, field trips, gym equipment)
- access and work collaboratively with community agencies to problem solve and provide supports (e.g., hot lunch and other food programs, social workers, health professionals)
- address partner and community use of school space
- address fragmentation of services – will be necessary for Aboriginal student success
- support families in the manner they are supported through Head Start
- invite Elders and other culturally informed guests into the classroom
- access and provide drug awareness and drug prevention programs
- support a “parents place” in an Aboriginal agency with an Aboriginal Liaison on site
- access and support research related to Aboriginal issues
- have stronger integration of child care system in the schools
- have co-location of mental health in the schools
- recognize difference Aboriginal mentors make to students and support Aboriginal mentors

Staffing: The importance of having Aboriginal staff throughout the system and having all district staff be knowledgeable about Aboriginal peoples was often cited as necessary for the academic success of Aboriginal students. For instance,

- hire Aboriginal staff at all levels of the organization
- ensure all staff receive appropriate Aboriginal awareness training
- recognize importance of leadership in schools being supportive of Aboriginal education for change to happen
- increase number of Aboriginal Consultants and Aboriginal Liaison Workers
- develop strategies to enable staff to understand how to work collaboratively; help staff understand that partners serving 0 to 6 should be welcomed and considered part of the school
- consider having an evening for Aboriginal employees

Achievement and Testing: While the Aboriginal community is unique in many ways, they share commonly held aspirations for academic success for their children. Aboriginal parents and

students voiced their hope that all Aboriginal students have positive school experiences, graduate from high school and have access to a full range of post-high school opportunities. They advised that they valued schooling approaches that recognized children and youth in context of their family and community and considered the cognitive, emotional and spiritual aspects, approaches that are not always well served by some current testing practices. For instance,

- Examine assessment and coding practices that result in a disproportionate percentages of Aboriginal students being coded special needs
- recognize the bias of many of the tests used
- broaden the range of achievement measures; more than academic grades must be considered, i.e., evaluate students on more than simple marks
- provide truthful and timely communication to parents about student progress
- track academic success of students who have attended Head Start
- recognize achievements of Aboriginal students (e.g., Nellie Carlson Youth Awards)
- increase high school completion rates – all youth need at least a high school education

District Rules, Regulations and Practices: Questions were raised about the rationale for, and the applicability of, some current district rules or practices. Also, a number of suggestions were made for modifying practice. For instance,

- Understand that Aboriginal practices may conflict with some district rules/regulations (e.g., guardianship and ceremonial practices)
- Remember sometimes rules need to be bent – “equity is not always equal”
- Simplify rules, regulations, practices to make system easier to navigate
- Make schools accountable for FNMI dollars
- revamp or discontinue use of Attendance Board for Aboriginal students as the current process is disrespectful
- provide increased support to families from Aboriginal Liaison Workers and Aboriginal Consultants regarding attendance
- Explore feasibility of getting satisfaction information from Aboriginal students and families
- Maintain external Aboriginal committee
- Establish working relationships with Treaty and Métis authorities
- collaborate with Edmonton Catholic Schools Aboriginal Education unit

Next Steps: This second interim report will be provided to all participants in the Task Force discussion groups. The Task Force is now in the process of analyzing the information it has received and will be developing a recommendation report for forwarding to Board by June 2007.

GC:ee