

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: E. Schmidt, Superintendent

SUBJECT: The Early Years: An Overview and Update

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RESOURCE
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INFORMATION

Purpose: This report provides an overview of partnerships and programs that support the Board's focus, in its strategic plan, on the early years. This report provides a context for the proposed early years policy.

Overview: The District is involved in the early years as a partner and as a provider of services. The Board supports and encourages this work based on research that underscores the importance of the early years, the sensitive years for brain development, which is crucial to the child's human development generally. The District's role is two fold. In the early years, the District complements the work of health and social services organizations and agencies that support families. Once children enter public schooling, the District takes a lead role and is supported by the community partners. By working collaboratively, all providers increase their ability to meet their goals and to maximize opportunities for the families they serve. In demanding economic times, there is a tendency to retreat to mandate although there are increased needs and compelling reasons for more collaboration. Fortunately, in the Edmonton community, commitment to collaboration and to early years involvement is high and should enable us to sustain the recent momentum.

District Involvement: As noted previously, the District is involved as a partner and as a provider. It has built in reflection and research in a number of the initiatives and is endeavouring to incorporate these in all initiatives as resources permit. Information about initiatives where the District is an active partner is provided in Appendix I and those where the District provides programs in Appendix II.

Next Steps: Once the Board approves an early years' policy, the District will develop an early years website anchored by the Board policy. The intent of the early years website is to contain key information about early years services available from partners and the District in an accessible format to provide parents the tools to make informed choices. The website will also contain links to current research and parent resources. Although the primary audience for this website will be parents, it will also be a valuable resource for District staff – a one-stop source underscoring the importance of the early years and the variety of services available in Edmonton.

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APPENDIX I Early Years District Partnerships
APPENDIX II Early Years District Initiatives

EARLY YEARS PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVES

Early Child Development Mapping Project: The Board supported an Early Development Instrument (EDI) pilot in 2005 and advocated through the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) and with the province to have EDI provincially supported. This past year, the District was one of the early adopters of the EDI. Also, the District is represented on the provincial steering committee advising on the implementation of the EDI and community mapping province-wide. This work is supported by researchers at McMaster University and others, such as Dr. Clyde Hertzmann and Dr. Janet Mort at the University of British Columbia. It is also a partner in a Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (CUP) preliminary research project regarding the use of EDI with Aboriginal populations.

Success By 6: The District is represented on Success By 6, a collaboration among government, non-profit groups, service providers and community members, dedicated to working together through an integrated community action plan to strengthen the well-being of children prenatal to age six and their families. Major goals include “an accessible, comprehensive and cohesive range of early childhood services,” “social policy that supports a stable early childhood system and increases long-term success of young children and their families,” and “strong links within communities and between early childhood and school age initiatives and services.” The Board’s proposed early years policy is aligned with the goals of Success By 6.

Early Identification Project: The District is an active participant in a collaborative project led by Alberta Health Services (formerly Capital Health). Thirty-six month old children are being screened for development using the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ) in the culturally-diverse community of Mill Woods. Screening occurs at schools. Staff from Edmonton Public and Catholic, together with community partners from health, and children’s services, assist in the screening. This approach is unique, in that, following screening, families are provided population-based information, education, and intervention that build on existing community resources. As a result, information about healthy development is accessible where and when parents need it.

Aligning Early Childhood Services Partners: This is a collaboration of partners in health, children’s services, Interagency Head Start and education to create an environment that promotes optimal child development for all children. The initiative commits to working cooperatively with community partners to ensure that high-quality early childhood services are coordinated to support parents and to enrich children’s lives, and enable them attain their full potential. The partners are working on developing and articulating a shared vision and understanding of Early Learning and care in the City of Edmonton with the objective to: identify best practices, quality standards and guidelines for early childhood services; support a continuum of service delivery for children and families; and support the ongoing sharing of latest research related to early learning and care.

This work led to Kindergarten Inclusive Developmental Services (KIDS), ABC Head Start and E4C Clareview Head Start collaboratively developing and providing professional

development to staff from these community groups and Edmonton Public Early Learning teachers and educational assistants.

Firm Foundations: The Firm Foundations pilot project is being implemented this year in nine district elementary schools in partnership with the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta. The schools participating are: Baturyn, Bisset, Fraser Homesteader, Montrose, Mount Royal, Princeton, Virginia Park and Westglen. Firm Foundations is an approach that emphasizes skill development in phonemic awareness for students at the kindergarten level. Kindergarten teachers from the pilot project schools are involved in learning about and implementing phonemic awareness activities in their classrooms through a series of professional development and modeling-coaching sessions. A 0.3 FTE reading specialist from Consulting Services facilitates the sessions and provides mentoring to the participants. Small group intervention for those students who are at risk for reading difficulties is an integral part of this program. Several assessment tools are also being piloted as part of the project, including one developed by the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta. Research regarding the effectiveness of the Firm Foundations approach is a final component of the pilot project.

Special Needs Groups: Edmonton Public Schools continues to nurture collaborative partnerships with other organizations dedicated to providing support to meet the unique and individual needs of children with special needs and their families as they transition into community kindergartens. Over the years this support has been provided by community partners such as Children's Autism Services of Edmonton, Community Options, Family Linkages, First Mennonite, and Getting Ready for Inclusion Today (GRIT). The number of students receiving this support has ranged from five to fifty-five. For the 2009-2010 school year, five students are receiving educational supports, such as an educational assistant and individualized program plan, in their community kindergarten from GRIT.

EARLY YEARS DISTRICT INITIATIVES

Early Education Programs: Ten schools offer Early Education Programs for children aged 2 1/2 to 5 1/2 years who meet Program Unit Funding (PUF) criteria for mild/moderate or severe special needs. They are located at Beacon Heights, Elmwood, Evansdale, Hazeldean, Hillview, Homesteader, Mayfield, Scott Robertson, Tevie Miller and Waverley schools.

Over the past two years, the program was reviewed and recommendations for continuous improvement made. Phase 1 of the review established five priority issues: Early Identification and Assessment, Programming, Staff Expertise, Support for Families, and Interagency Collaboration and Partnership. Phase 2 reviewed best practices for children with special education needs in early childhood programs and made recommendations for continued improvement. Recommendations from Phase 2 of the District review of Early Education are currently being implemented. To date, three working groups have been struck to support the implementation: (1) Registration, (2) Assessment and Growth Measures, and (3) Transitions.

Early Learning Classes: Nine schools are offering Early Learning classes for children 3 1/2 years as of September 1 who are English Language Learners, special needs or live in the school catchment area. Schools offering the programs are Balwin, Caernarvon, Delton, John A. McDougall, McCauley, Norwood, Parkdale, Sifton and Youngstown.

Funding for these classrooms comes from a variety of sources. In June 2007, new funding from Alberta Education for early childhood programming for English language learners (ELL), when combined with PUF and mild/moderate funds for children who are eligible for these resources, increased the feasibility of offering such classes. In addition to these three funding sources, a private donor has assisted over the past three years, giving \$140,000 in the 2008-2009 school year. School and central services personnel gather literacy information annually from Early Learning classes for the purpose of identifying program needs, including the impact of Early Learning programs may have on full-day kindergarten.

One site, the Balwin Early Learning program, is a pilot project involving a number of community partners (the Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative [MCHB], Edmonton and Area Child and Family Services Authority, the University of Alberta, Alberta Health Services, ABC Head Start, and the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers). The program has brought together children and families from three cultural communities (Kurdish, Somali and Sudanese) to support the children's language development by focusing on home language and to strengthen the children's pride and understanding with respect to their home culture. The unique structure and goals of the preschool afford us an opportunity to look at curriculum through a new lens as we work to integrate home language and cultural learning with good early child practice and find meaningful ways to involve families and community in the curriculum process.

Full-Day Kindergarten: The District offers full-day kindergarten at 25 schools. Schools involved are Abbott, Athlone, Balwin, Belmead, Belvedere, Brightview, Delton, Eastwood, Evansdale, Glendale, Homesteader, Horse Hill, Inglewood, John A. McDougall, R.J. Scott,

McCauley, Montrose, Norwood, Parkdale, Prince Charles, Rundle, Sherwood, Sifton, Spruce Avenue and Youngstown.

With the introduction of full-day kindergarten at Norwood School in 1998-1999, a research partnership was formed between the District and Dr. Jose da Costa, Professor of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Dr. da Costa, with assistance of various central services personnel, examined the longitudinal comparisons, through to Grade 6, between EPS students who attended a full-day kindergarten program and a half-day kindergarten program. He has reported the longitudinal findings at public board, including a report in May 2008 based on the years 2001 to 2007. The findings have guided decisions related to professional development, programming in the early years and practices related to Aboriginal students and students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In the fall of 2008, Dr. da Costa began work with central services personnel to expand the study to examine three new full-day kindergarten cohorts, including one group of Early Learning classes.

Kindergarten Inclusive Developmental Services (KIDS): KIDS provides ongoing multi-disciplinary support in community kindergarten classrooms to children who meet PUF criteria for mild/moderate and severe special needs. Supports are also provided to the kindergarten teacher, educational assistant and the children's parents. KIDS have many partnerships with health and other service providers. For example, KIDS and GRIT are looking at ways to work collaboratively when each service is providing support to children in the same District kindergarten program.

KIDS and Edmonton Catholic Schools Early Education Unit are working with Alberta Education Early Learning department to look at different ways of identifying children who meet criteria for PUF and mild/moderate funds. The current funding model in early learning available through Alberta Education is based on identifying a delay or disability in a child through assessment. This funding demonstrates Alberta Education's commitment to early learning and has allowed us to better meet the diverse needs of all children entering kindergarten. However, there are challenges with the approach. For instance, timely access to professionals such as Speech Language Pathologists is not always available and it is time consuming to assess and write reports before programming and collaboration with teachers can begin. Our current model is reactive rather than proactive, uses labels to identify children and runs the risk of missing children because of the complexity of the process to identify. This year the partners are exploring other options.

Subsidized Space: In the District, 83 Edmonton Public schools provide space for a range of early learning programs and child care. Five schools lease space to Head Start/Early Intervention Programs; 11 schools lease space to Head Start/Early Intervention Programs and Child Care/Preschool programs; and 67 schools lease space to Child Care/Preschool programs. Over time, the intent is to assist all schools and the early learning providers to become true partners, rather than simply co-located programs.