

## EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

November 28, 2006

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: Interim Report

RESOURCE

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

### INFORMATION

**Background:** On January 31, 2006, the Board of Trustees approved the creation of a Task Force to study the issue of Aboriginal Education. Subsequently, on May 23, 2006, the board approved the Terms of Reference (Appendix I) for the district's Aboriginal Education Task Force. The purpose of the task force is:

- To identify ways to strengthen and encourage relationships between the board of trustees and the Aboriginal parent and student community it serves.
- To increase board awareness and understanding of Aboriginal education needs, opportunities and priorities in order to guide the board's education policy leadership and political advocacy efforts in support of improved Aboriginal student achievement.

The process outlined involves dialogue with Aboriginal parents and students and with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community stakeholders, as well as developing interim reports and final recommendations to the board. This is the first interim report.

**Activity Update:** To provide a context for the Trustee members of the task force, a discussion and background paper (Appendix II) outlining past and current district initiatives was developed. Based on the stated purposes and process outlined in the Terms of Reference, meetings were arranged with Aboriginal students and parents and with district staff who teach these students. As well, to get a community perspective, meetings were also arranged with staff from a range of agencies who serve Aboriginal children, youth and families and who have links with the district.

At this time, the Trustee Aboriginal Task Force has met with Aboriginal students and their parents, as well as staff, at Westmount junior high and with parents and staff at Abbott elementary school. The meetings were held at the schools and separate meetings were scheduled with each of students, staff and parents. The task force also has met with staff of the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society and the Métis Child and Family Services Association. The Bent Arrow meeting was held at their recently opened Aboriginal Parent Link Centre and Métis Child at their association offices. Participants have voiced their appreciation of the involvement of Trustees and their willingness to reach out to the broad community. The discussions have been centered around three questions: What is working

well? What barriers still exist? What opportunities or suggestions do you have for next steps?

Additional meetings are scheduled prior to the Christmas break with students, staff and parents at Amiskwaciy junior and senior high, with parents and staff at Prince Charles elementary school, as well as with the Ben Calf Robe Society and the Red Road Healing Society. A visit to the Rites of Passage Program has also been confirmed.

A Trustee member of the task force and a district staff member have been participating at meetings of the Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Accord Initiative, an initiative spearheaded by the City of Edmonton. The intent is to stay linked with the Accord Initiative and to have more focused dialogue with the city of Edmonton later in the Task Force's process. The interim Board reports will be provided to the agencies and schools visited for sharing with participants, to the Accord, to the Métis Nation of Alberta, to Treaty 6 and to Treaty 8.

To date, the Task force has spent just less than \$800 or about 7 per cent of the allocated budget. The Task Force presented the hosts at the various meetings with *Mwakwa Talks to the Loon*, a book written and illustrated by Dale Auger. Refreshments were provided at afternoon meetings and a light supper for the evening sessions with parents.

**Next Steps:** In January 2007, a meeting will be scheduled with representatives from the non-Aboriginal community stakeholders and later with Elders. The input received will be analysed, themes will be identified and implications for board leadership and political advocacy will be discussed. It is anticipated, that at this stage, the task force will meet with Elders to advise what they heard and what they plan and to seek guidance prior to moving forward. The intent is to provide one or two interim reports in 2007 and a final report with recommendations no later than June 2007.

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Appendix I: Aboriginal Education Task Force Terms of Reference  
Appendix II: Aboriginal Education: Discussion and Background Paper

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
ABORIGINAL EDUCATION TASK FORCE  
TERMS OF REFERENCE

Composition

The Aboriginal Task Force shall consist of three trustees appointed by the Board of Trustees to serve until the end of the current board's tenure, October 2007.

The Superintendent of Schools shall assign appropriate staff to support the work of the Aboriginal Task Force.

Parameters

All recommendations from the Task Force will be presented to the Conference Committee for recommendation to the Board of Trustees at a public board meeting.

The Task Force will support but not duplicate the administration's work with external partners in improving Aboriginal student achievement.

Purpose

To identify ways to strengthen and encourage relationships between the board of trustees and the Aboriginal parent and student community it serves.

To increase board awareness and understanding of Aboriginal education needs, opportunities and priorities in order to guide the board's education policy leadership and political advocacy efforts in support of improved Aboriginal student achievement.

Process

- The Task Force will follow Indigenous protocols.
- Dialogue with district Aboriginal parents and students to provide a district base for further consultation (spring 2006).
- Continue dialogue with Aboriginal parents and students, dialogue with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community stakeholders, invite presentations and submissions and review literature (fall and winter 2006-07).
- Develop interim and final recommendations to the board of trustees. (spring 2007)

Amendment to the Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference may be amended upon recommendation of the Aboriginal Education Task Force and approval of the Board of Trustees.

### **Aboriginal Education: Discussion and Background Paper**

**Introduction:** The district for well over a decade has grappled with issues related to providing appropriate and effective learning opportunities for Aboriginal students. This work has typically involved consultation with the Aboriginal community, research reviews, discussions with school staffs and visits to other jurisdictions. Over this period of time, the number of self-identified Aboriginal students increased from 2,207 to 7,126 this year, with continued anticipated growth in the future. While achievement data indicates that some gains have been made, the reality is that many, if not most of the issues identified in the past, are still issues today.

Historical background covering the years 1990-1998 is provided in Attachment I, initiatives introduced in 1999 to present in Attachment II.

**What have we learned?** We have learned that the Aboriginal community is a diverse community, with varied accomplishments, needs and points of view. We have learned that there is still a tendency on behalf of the dominant culture to view the Aboriginal community within the immigrant community context and that this is offensive to Aboriginal peoples. We have learned that the following issues identified over the past decade and a half remain as issues:

- differences between school culture and Aboriginal cultures
- family circumstances: poverty, transiency
- overt or covert discrimination
- resources, practices and strategies that are unresponsive to the learning needs of Aboriginal students
- programming that does not provide sufficient opportunities for Aboriginal and other students to acquire knowledge about contemporary Aboriginal issues and positive attitudes about Aboriginal peoples
- limited communication between schools/district and Aboriginal parents
- limited provision of Cree Language and Culture courses and lack of a Cree bilingual program
- lack of substantial representation of Aboriginal peoples on district staff
- limited knowledge about Aboriginal peoples by our community in general
- non-culturally sensitive assessment practices

We have learned that we need to listen to and involve students, parents, and the broader Aboriginal community in identifying and implementing solutions. We have learned that some members of the Aboriginal community believe there will be no real change until they have governance authority in urban settings. We have learned that many believe systemic changes, embedded in our work and involving all district staff in collaboration with community, is needed. We have learned that we need to improve our data collection – both qualitative and quantitative – especially as it relates to dropping out of school and graduating.

**What are our challenges?** We face a number of challenges in moving this work to another level. For instance, it is difficult to:

- implement what we know
  - because issues are embedded in broader societal factors such a poverty and racism, it impedes the impact of our work in schools

- because it is in large part about increasing each staff member's knowledge and attitude, it is long term, ongoing work
- because we still have only limited knowledge about the validity of our measurement tools with regard to Aboriginal students and about effective strategies, in many instances, we are still in the "try and see" if it works stage
- monitor progress
  - because we base our monitoring on self-identified Aboriginal students and we don't know what percentage of students self-identify or whether there is a built-in bias in the self-identification, our data provides indicators of trends rather than solid data
  - because we are relying heavily on quantitative data, we are uncertain whether or not we are making progress in areas such as racism and parent involvement that requires qualitative data
- work within current financial realities
  - because strategies required – e.g., engaging parents, engaging community agencies, inservicing staff, doing research, modifying testing, collecting qualitative data – are all time consuming and labour intensive, this means substantial financial resources are required and limited resources, limits the amount of this work that can be accomplished
- effect systemic change in a site-based environment
  - because systemic rather than tinkering with one or two items is required, it means working with all our schools and all central office units to make changes in our beliefs, our processes and our practices – very long term work
  - because we are site-based we typically do not have a central point of contact, this makes it difficult for schools and for community to advocate effectively with the organization or for the organization to have a fully accurate picture of school and community priorities
- set priorities when everything seems urgent
  - because we work with community and community members themselves have different priorities, we feel a need to honour their priorities in some way
  - because we see a need to move on multiple fronts and have community lobbying with us but we have limited resources, extreme discipline is required for us to select a few priorities and do them in depth. At the moment, we are still working broadly.

**What next?** The intent is to maintain the initiatives that are showing promise (e.g., infusion project, resource identification, partnerships with Aboriginal community agencies, provision of choice, ongoing dialogue with community) and to introduce new strategies or initiatives that address challenges we have identified and are priorities for our Aboriginal community.

Initiatives that we are just beginning and/or are planning to work on in 2006-07 include:

- reviewing of board multiculturalism policy and through this work investigate the need and support for a separate Aboriginal policy
- investigating need for, and nature of, a racism protocol
- training a cohort of district consultants with regard to cultural understandings and issues
- including an Aboriginal and Multicultural component in all the staff leadership and development programs

- exploring culturally appropriate assessment practices and tools in collaboration with community
- considering a qualitative research study of the educational experiences of Aboriginal children
- mining the opportunities for Aboriginal education afforded by the various AISI projects (e.g., differentiated programming, deepening literacy understanding)
- refining a framework that will enable us to work in a coordinated fashion with community to integrate strategies, projects and partnerships as well as enable us to better identify gaps and priorities
- using such a framework to identify joint initiatives with community partners (see Attachment II); for example:
  - piloting a strategy to welcome Aboriginal parents and students even before they start kindergarten
  - investigating feasibility of expanding Cree Language and Culture and/or introducing a Cree bilingual program
  - expanding mentorship opportunities to junior high
  - exploring strategies to improve transitions between levels of schooling and to the workplace or post secondary.

**Conclusion:** To be successful in improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, it is critical that all aspects of the district's organization be involved. All units must consider how their practices either contribute or inhibit progress. Dialogue with the community must be ongoing and all parties must learn how to effectively collaborate in support of students.

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ATTACHMENT I: Historical Background: The Years 1990-1999  
 ATTACHMENT II: Recent Initiatives: The Years 1999 to the Present  
 ATTACHMENT III: FNMI Community-District Framework

### **Historical Background: The Years 1990-1998**

(Source: Edmonton Public Schools, Programs)

Foundational work was undertaken in the 1990-1991 school year, culminating in a May 21, 1991 board report. The report cited the following causes for the lack of success for Aboriginal students:

- differences between school culture and Aboriginal cultures
- family circumstances: poverty, transiency, substance abuse
- overt or covert discrimination
- resources, practices and strategies that are unresponsive to the learning needs of Aboriginal students
- programming that does not provide sufficient opportunities for Aboriginal and other students to acquire knowledge about contemporary Aboriginal issues and positive attitudes about Aboriginal peoples.

The report also provided an extensive plan indicating that all schools and central units have a role to play if educational outcomes for Aboriginal students are to be substantially improved. The goals identified in this plan at that time are still relevant today. They are:

- to improve Aboriginal student achievement and self-esteem
- to improve the continuity of learning for Aboriginal students
- to improve the quality and timeliness of services provided to Aboriginal students, parents and community
- to support the partnership of home and the school in the development of Aboriginal students
- to improve access to services provided by social agencies.

One concrete action resulting from this plan was the decision in May 1992 to enable self identification of Aboriginal students. This was a necessary condition to enable the district to monitor the achievement of Aboriginal students. As a result, the administration was able to take a report to conference in May 1993 regarding enrolment information and achievement baseline data from 1992. The data indicated a disproportionate number of Aboriginal students identified in certain special needs categories and that a smaller percentage of the self-identified Aboriginal students

- wrote the grade 3, 6, and 9 language arts, mathematics, science and social studies achievement tests
- met the benchmark in each of the 12 achievement tests
- attended school regularly
- attended only one school.

While gains have definitely been made, in general terms, the facts remain the same in the following time period described next and still in our current context.

In 1994, community input identified the following as major issues for the schools and districts to tackle:

- find different ways to communicate with Aboriginal parents about what and how their children are learning
- have higher expectations of Aboriginal students

- be aware that there are differences in the attitudes toward discipline between Aboriginal families and schools
- identify alternatives to suspension
- focus on Aboriginal students' strengths, not just their difficulties
- be knowledgeable about, and sensitive to, Aboriginal culture and help students develop pride in their culture
- have Aboriginal role models
- use, in a more substantial and integrated fashion, Aboriginal community and cultural resources
- have formal contracts in the Aboriginal community as mentors, role models, experts
- provide Cree language courses and Aboriginal issues courses in junior and senior high schools
- have advocates for Aboriginal students and Aboriginal education.

As well, the administration provided a follow up report to conference regarding enrolment information and achievement information for 1992 and 1993 in comparison to the baseline information from 1992 to 1994. As noted previously, there continued to be disproportionate numbers of students in certain special needs categories and achievement showed gains but still remained below the district average.

In 1995, input from the Aboriginal community identified the following as major issues:

- the presentation of inaccurate information about Aboriginal peoples and their history
- the paucity of information about Aboriginal peoples introduced in schools, particularly information on contemporary issues
- the lack of opportunities for students to learn an Aboriginal language
- limited programming adapted or designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal students
- the small number of Aboriginal teaching and administrative staff in the districts
- the lack of knowledge and expertise regarding Aboriginal history, culture and practice among district staff
- the importance of parent involvement, acknowledgement of the difficulties in involving parents, and the belief that Aboriginal parents are often not welcomed in the schools
- the failure to acknowledge that racism exists and consequently to be pro-active in dealing with it.

This feedback was obtained through four focus groups: Aboriginal parents, Aboriginal educators, service providers and members of the cultural community. The recommendations made by the participants with regard to curriculum, programming, Aboriginal culture and language, resources, staffing and staff development, parent involvement and racism, as well as achievement information, was developed into an information package and provided to all principals.

From 1995 to 1998, information continued to be provided to schools through various avenues such as a principal advisory group and superintendent's council. In 1998, an Aboriginal education symposium was held. A major focus of the symposium was expansion of the Awasis program to junior high but the recommendations resulting from the symposium were broader. Many of the recommendations regarding curriculum, instruction, parent and community participation, recruitment and training applied not only to Awasis but the district overall.



**Recent Initiatives: The Years 1999 to the Present**

(Source: Edmonton Public Schools, Programs)

Over the past seven years, the district has been actively engaged on numerous fronts – staffing, programming, curriculum development, resource identification, working with community, seeking input from community, investigating approaches in other jurisdictions and consulting the research.

With regard to staffing, the district

- increased staff in Aboriginal Education and appointed several Aboriginal principals
- continues to explore new ways of attracting and maintaining Aboriginal staff in the district.

With regard to programming, the district

- opened Amiskwacy Academy in September 2000.
- offers the Rites of Passage Program, a transition program for junior high age Aboriginal students, in collaboration with Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society
- through the Student Assessment unit provides schools with the names of students who are performing below grade level in reading and writing, enabling schools to target strategies to assist these students
- has introduced and will expand an attendance pilot to all district schools assist schools to introduce changes before attendance is a major issue
- introduced and is learning from the City Centre Education Project.

With regard to curriculum development, the district, on contract with Alberta Education,

- developed Aboriginal Studies 10, 20 and 30
- developed the provincial Cree Language and Culture Program, and
- led the Aboriginal Infusion Project.

The Aboriginal Infusion project is being piloted in language arts and science in the City Centre Education Project.

With regard to resource identification, the district

- developed and continues to expand the Aboriginal Collection On-Line.

This collection is being used by other jurisdictions.

With regard to working with community, the district

- in partnerships with Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society and Ben Calf Robe, has three Aboriginal Head Starts in district schools
- in partnerships with Métis Child and Family Services, has five Aboriginal social workers in five district junior highs
- in partnership with Ben Calf Robe, has two family liaison workers at Prince Charles school
- in partnership with Bent Arrow, has an Aboriginal mentorship program in three district schools.

With regard to seeking input from others, the district

- regenerated a standing external Aboriginal committee.

This committee identified use of inappropriate assessment tools and practices, limited understanding of the diversity within the Aboriginal community, and limited use of early education programming and wholistic teaching practices as issues.

With regard to investigating approaches in other jurisdictions, district staff

- visited other districts and shared information gleaned to schools through superintendent's council.

With regard to consulting the research, the district

- conducted a second review of the literature

The review substantiated recommendations made by staff and the Aboriginal community. It also suggested offering full day kindergarten for Aboriginal students, increasing support for Aboriginal career counseling and career options for Aboriginal students interested in the trades and programs that include flexible learning pathways.

While this work, and the fact that the trustees approved a Trustee Aboriginal Task Force, demonstrates that the district has provided leadership both within the district and provincially, more work is required to resolve the issues or challenges identified over the years and to continue to improve academic achievement.

**FNMI DISTRICT ADVISORY GROUP**  
 Collaborative Projects with Community Partners  
 (Source: Edmonton Public Schools, Programs)

<b>PROJECT AREAS IDENTIFIED (based on input from group)</b>	<b>INTERESTED PARTIES</b>	<b>POSSIBLE INITIATIVE/EXISTING INITIATIVES</b>	<b>CURRENTLY IDENTIFIED COMMUNITY PARTNERS</b>	<b>STATUS OF INITIATIVE</b>
Prevention/Early Intervention/Family Involvement	Margaret Ebbers Lorna L'Hirondelle  Karen Bardy Gloria Chalmers  Gloria	Stepping Into School  Youth interventions  Head Start	Ben Calf Robe Red Road Healing Society Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society  Métis Child and Family Services  Ben Calf Robe & Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society	Montrose, Newton, Beacon Heights, Belvedere principals meet monthly, events planned for Jan, Feb, Mar, Jun  5 workers in place again  Have 3 in district schools - Abbott, Belmead, Sherwood
Literacy	Lorna Gloria Karen	Extend Cree language and culture offerings Investigate feasibility of Cree bilingual program  Link/enhance AISI projects  Building Blocks literacy program  Oral Tradition – story telling skill development	Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society   Red Road Healing Society  Red Road Healing Society Sandra Skare	Consider surveying parents Learn from St. Francis experience  Report on AISI projects at fall 2006 meeting  Program will continue in 2006-07 Develop description to send to FNMI schools Possible inservice/AISI
Complementary programs, curriculum, connections and resources	Programs Unit	Awasis  Rites of Passage  Amiskwacy  Investigate additional Awasis elementary site	Ben Calf Robe  Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society  Métis Child & Family Services	Workers in Place  Program in Place  Worker in place.  Planning to bring to next Internal meeting some background enrolment information to further discuss the possibility of establishing another Awasis location

National Aboriginal Day	Ingrid Tenkate, Margaret, Lorna		Concordia UCEP, Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society, Red Road, Ben Calf Robe	Combined with Stepping into Schools so that it is a year long program
On-Line Aboriginal Collection	Lorna, Margaret	Raise profile with FNMI schools		Meeting in late Nov. to start work
Mentorships	Lorna, Margaret	Coyote Pride	Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society	Program in place in 3 schools and will continue in 06/07 Family night monthly for 5 schools at Sherwood
	Lorna	Aboriginal Role Models	Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society Dr. James Dempsey	Need to reconnect with University of Alberta
	Karen/Margaret	Aboriginal Businesses	Jay Ball, Junior Achievement	Karen & Margaretha have met with Junior Achievement
	Gloria	Expanding/Developing framework	Shauna Seneca	Programs has met with Big Brothers, Big Sisters and United Way
Transitions	Ingrid	Tracking kids from Rites of Passage and other secondary sites		Ingrid has conducted interviews; established baseline data, etc. Work continuing
	Ingrid, Karen Elisa Rawe	Tracking project, i.e. tracking successful transitions to K, to 7, to 9 and after 12		
Staffing	Programs Unit	YTC/Hobbema teacher education programs U of A teacher education program Enhancing Aboriginal Teacher recruitment	Concordia, UCEP  U of A	Visit with YTC Contact made with AB Ed (secondary) Noella Steinhauer
Professional Development	Committee members	Explore possibility of a session for high schools		
Assessment	Gloria Jody Lundell	Culturally appropriate assessment	Joanne PomPana Shauna Seneca Dr. Dempsey Alanda Fox Sandra Skare	Follow up Dr. Das work contact made with Darcy Fleming & Rebecca Gokiart Stan Bird present to group on September 28
Research	Margaret, Ingrid, Lorna	Visual Narrative of school experience of FNMI urban students		Approved in principle at presentation to FNMI committee, Sept /06 Proposal writing has begun

Updated November 15, 2006