

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

April 14, 2009

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: E. Schmidt, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: District Response to Alberta School Boards Association High School Completion Task Force Board Survey

ORIGINATOR: D. Barrett, Assistant Superintendent

RESOURCE
STAFF: Gloria Chalmers, Kathy McCabe, Stuart Wachowicz

RECOMMENDATION

That the attached district response to the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) Task Force Board Survey be approved for submission to ASBA.

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Background

The ASBA has identified high school completion as a priority advocacy initiative and has requested school boards be surveyed with respect to this initiative. On March 9, 2009, the Board of Trustees requested the Administration to prepare a response. The proposed response (Appendix I) is provided for board consideration.

APPENDIX I – Edmonton Public Schools Response to ASBA High School Completion Survey

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EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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**"ASBA HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION SURVEY"
EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS RESPONSE TO SURVEY
April 14, 2009**

1. Purpose

This survey was drafted to encourage feedback from trustees. Though it is acknowledged that administration will be relied upon to assist in completing this survey, it is imperative we receive the trustee perspective.

School boards are asked to complete this online survey by April 27, 2009.

As you will be aware, ASBA has identified high school completion as one of its advocacy priorities. A task force, Chaired by Jackie Swainson (Zone 4 Director on the ASBA Board of Directors), was assigned the responsibility of both identifying the unique contributions school boards can make to improving high school completion rates, and identifying and developing resources to assist school boards in their efforts to improve high school completion rates.

The ASBA High School Completion Task Force was assembled ensuring representation from each zone and a representative cross section of Alberta's school boards. In addition, Alberta Education appointed representatives to participate in this initiative.

As a result of the recommendations made by the ASBA High School Completion Task Force, Alberta school boards are being surveyed to assist in identifying students at risk and any current efforts to improve high school completion rates. Sharing this information is anticipated to significantly assist boards in identifying students at risk along with the most efficient use of resources to address their needs while minimizing the duplication of efforts between school boards.

We thank you in advance for your time and efforts. We cannot underestimate the value of sharing our experiences with one another, learning from those examples and enhancing our services through the shared knowledge.

1. Board Name

Edmonton Public School District

2. Current Status

1. **Are you aware of Alberta Education’s methodology for calculating high school completion and drop out rates? How did you become aware of Alberta Education’s process?**

Yes. The Board became aware of this process through a presentation at a public board meeting.

2. **Does your jurisdiction track completion and drop out rates by the same calculation as the Alberta Education? If not, what is your rationale for utilizing a different measure?**

Yes. Edmonton Public Schools tracks the information using the same calculation as Alberta Education.

3. **What processes for information gathering and data analysis does your jurisdiction currently use for the purposes of identifying students at risk of not completing high school?**

The District's Student Information System (SIS) creates reports to assist teachers in identifying at risk students. Students are flagged and schools develop intervention plans for each student at each school.

The District and individual high schools identify and track course completion rates.

4. **Has your jurisdiction been able to identify factors which contribute to students leaving high school early? Please list the factors. How were you able to identify these factors?**

Studies by the Alberta Government and Statistics Canada identify these factors as contributing to early school leaving. Data, student focus groups, interviews and school staff feedback confirm that these factors also impact school leaving in district schools. All research indicates that school leaving is a process that starts early and is not only a high school issue.

Students who have dropped out of school most often cite school-related reasons for leaving school. Some school related factors include:

- teaching methods that do not meet a student's needs so that a student falls behind and becomes frustrated; especially if there is a history of low achievement
- identification as a special needs student (learning and behaviour disabilities)
- low expectations of students related to their academic abilities
- repeating a grade, particularly at elementary school; but also repeating courses in Grade 10
- alienation – the student does not feel cared for or cared about which can result in feelings of powerlessness, lack of control over immediate and long term environment, lack of self-esteem, isolation
- students’ perceptions of irrelevance of education to their future; including a lack of occupational aspirations

Underlying factors:

- Poverty, especially multi-generational poverty, contributes to the difficulties some students have in school. Families living in poverty often lack the resources to create a rich early learning environment for their children (e.g. time, prior learning, finances, awareness). This creates a large early learning gap prior to starting formal schooling.
- Students exposed to violence in their homes, communities or through war, have psychological barriers to learning. Many of these children, with complex learning needs, are congregated in high needs schools without sufficient resources to address their needs.
- Ethnic minority and Aboriginal children are more likely to experience poverty and prior or concurrent violence in their communities. This can contribute to learning and behavior difficulties in school. Further, adding to these difficulties are associated stereotypes and racism that alienate these children and their families within the education system. These families are the least able to advocate within the education system for supports that will meet their children's needs.

5. Has your jurisdiction been able to identify factors which would contribute to students successfully completing high school? Please list the factors. How were you able to identify these factors?

Research from a variety of sources, experiences of school staff and district data helped to identify the following factors:

- early learning initiatives designed to lessen the large learning gap prior to formal learning
- varied teaching approaches that allow students to learn and demonstrate their learning in multiple ways
- collaboration to increase the learning connections between school, home and community to extend learning opportunities beyond traditional school hours
- connecting all students to the school and community by including youth in planning and decision-making around extra-curricular activities and community service
- building on student resiliency through careful creation of inclusive, diverse classrooms where all students contribute and are recognized
- non-retention in grades prior to high school and a focus on Grade 10 successful completion of courses
- high academic expectations and belief in students' ability to meet those expectations combined with appropriate support and challenge; reduced streaming
- increased student control over learning, appropriate to their age, through assessment for learning strategies that support students' increased independence and choice
- strategies to connect all students to at least one trusted adult in the school environment
- deliberate and extensive connections between schools to ease transitions from elementary to junior high and junior high to senior high
- hiring and retaining diverse teaching and support staff that reflect student diversity combined with other strategies to provide students with role-models they can identify with
- extensive and individualized career planning and support in high school, particularly for students with high needs
- focused use of data by school staff to identify areas of need, create specific and local short term and long term goals that are geared to the needs of their unique school population and reflect on progress.

3. Targets/Goals

1. Has your jurisdiction identified high school completion as a priority? Has your jurisdiction identified other priorities as being at least as important and what are they?

Yes. The District has identified other initiatives that will positively impact high school completion rates over time. Some examples include

- provision of and advocacy for funding for full day kindergarten for vulnerable students
- a district initiative to strengthen programming and support for Aboriginal students
- development of a Skill Centre Pilot to support effective alignment of Career and Technology Studies (CTS) courses to post secondary and workplace requirements
- support for the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP)
- Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) Community Collaboration initiative to support interagency collaboration to improve school success
- established a Multicultural Task force to provide leadership to support improved success for immigrant students
- the District is developing a work plan to address improved outcomes and services for students with special education needs
- offering programs of choice to increase student engagement
- providing a variety of outreach programs to meet the needs of students

2. Has your jurisdiction identified targets or goals for improving high school completion and/or reducing drop out rates? If so, what are they?

- District targets are set for increasing the percentage of students meeting the acceptable standard on Provincial Achievement Tests. The target set for 2009-2010 in the Three Year District Plan 2008-2011 is 77 per cent. Improving achievement in Grades 1 to 9 will help to improve high school completion in the future.
- The Superintendent has set a goal that 100 per cent of the students who began Kindergarten in 2007-2008 will successfully complete high school in 2020.
- Schools set individual goals for successful completion of core courses in high school. Successful completion of individual courses positively impacts successful completion of high school.

3. Have you incorporated these plans into your overall strategic plan for the jurisdiction? How so?

Yes.

The District 2008-2011 Three Year District Plan includes the 77 per cent target and a Specific Action Plan based on a comprehensive framework including: early intervention/prevention; literacy and numeracy; alternate modes of delivery; targeted/enhanced resources; assessment and monitoring; partnerships and alliances with community organizations and groups; family involvement; staff development and research.

The Trustees' strategic directions referenced in the District's plan underscore the importance of the early years, diversity, high school completion and transition to the world of work or post-secondary and a human resources strategy in support of such directions.

4. As it bears on this issue, what is the role of your Board of Trustees in identifying priorities, setting targets or goals and determining your overall strategic plan?

Trustees work with stakeholders to set direction through the development of district priorities. They determine the planning base which identifies how funds will be distributed to support the achievement of the priorities. Members of the board meet with clusters of schools and central services units to monitor plans and initiatives prior to final approval and submission of district plans and budget to Alberta Education in June. In the fall Trustees meet with schools and central services to review the results achieved.

Trustees also identify specific areas for focus and advocacy to support district priorities.

4. Current Projects

1 Please describe, in a few sentences, one or two initiatives and/or system improvements demonstrating the greatest degree of success or promise in improving high school completion and/or reducing drop out rates. What impact have you experienced as a result of these initiatives and/or system improvements? What impact are you anticipating?

Math for All: The District identified concerns in our mathematics programming and as a result introduced an initiative to address this, "Math for All". The initiative, currently for Kindergarten to Grade 9 teachers, develops curriculum expertise through a coaching model.

Early Years: Research demonstrates that full-day kindergarten children appear to keep pace with their higher socio-economic status (SES) counterparts with respect to the proportion of children achieving at grade level in their reading and writing abilities through their lower elementary experiences. The District has now added pre-kindergarten programming for students who need additional English language experiences and Middle Years Literacy to continue to support students if they begin to lose ground.

Early Development Instrument (EDI): The District is an early adopter of the EDI as it believes it has the potential to galvanize the community to better support families with young children through the early years.

Wraparound Services: The District works collaboratively with the community to provide mentoring, summer school, cultural brokers and in-school settlement workers, in-school social workers, youth workers and success coaches. This work is relatively new and at this time our evidence is mainly anecdotal – positive feedback from staff, students, and family indicating that these services have made a difference and are keeping students in school.

Aboriginal Strategies: Recently emphasis has been placed on supporting transition from Grade 6 to Grade 7 and Grade 9 to Grade 10, as well as tracking Grade 12 students and keeping them in school. A session that was held in the various district high schools for arriving Grade 10 Aboriginal students, who were provided with information about Aboriginal education consultants and liaisons, was well received. Grade 12 students continue to be tracked and followed up, resulting in some who dropped out returning for second semester. An Aboriginal resource room is being piloted this year and use by students and teachers has been very promising.

Student Engagement: Focus has been placed on linking the curriculum with real world learning, career and post secondary opportunities through Edmonton Public School's Career Focused Education initiatives:

- **The Skill Centre:** This is a cross ministry initiative (Education, Advanced Education, Alberta Health and Alberta Apprenticeship). The Skill Centre is also a partnership between Edmonton Public Schools and NAIT, with NAIT assisting in the development of the courses and resources. The objective of the Skill Centre is to allow high school students to access valuable resources and gain real-world experience with hands-on courses. Students learn about a career to make an informed decision about their future. This engagement will encourage a number of students to complete their schooling and successfully transition to work or post secondary.
- **Dual Credentialing Programs:** Successful transition to a registered post secondary program is by definition school completion. For some students this is viewed as more desirable or more possible than achieving a high school diploma, and encourages engagement and life long success. The District has developed the following certification programs for students while they are still in school:
 - Health care Aide Professional – Norquest and Capital Health
 - Print Media Production Program – Norquest
 - Iverson Computing Science program – University of Alberta
 - A+ Computer Repair Certification
 - Child Care Certification

2. Does your jurisdiction currently utilize the resources, research or initiatives available through Alberta Education? Which of these efforts have made the greatest impact? Have you worked with representative(s) from Alberta Education in developing initiatives for your jurisdiction? Are you aware of who to contact in Alberta Education for assistance?

Yes. The District does utilize a number of resources, programs and initiatives provided through Alberta Education. The District has worked very closely with Alberta Education's curriculum implementation initiatives for both social studies and mathematics. The resources available on LearnAlberta are also used extensively. Through grants, Alberta Education supports the Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) and the Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium (ERLC). The District is very involved with both the AAC and the ERLC.

The Accountability Pillar Clearinghouse (APCH) site is not user friendly. Research articles require a fee or subscription to an on-line journal. As well, the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) summaries are available on the AISI clearinghouse in a more useful search format. This site has valuable information and is helpful for obtaining contact information about other projects that have been implemented through AISI across Alberta.

Some of the resources are of significant value in helping to promote student engagement and in promoting school completion and successful transitions. While many of the following programs encourage a student to acquire a high school diploma, some students, who are unlikely to receive a diploma, are also by being assisted to transition to a post secondary program or apprenticeship, thus becoming a school completer. Some of these programs are as follows:

Youth Apprenticeship Program (YAP): The YAP pilot is in its second year in the District. The program serves to help engage youth in the junior high age group who are at higher than normal risk of non completion. Training facilities have been accessed through a partnership with Alberta Job Corps. It is a learner centered, experiential approach that includes job shadowing and workplace learning opportunities. The goal of the program is to increase awareness of career opportunities in order to increase the number of students who make a successful transition to high school and to date has shown considerable success in helping motivate students to remain in school and become focused on a potential career.

Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP): RAP is a way for registered high school students to become apprentices, and earn credits toward an apprenticeship program and a high school diploma at the same time. This is highly motivational and over one half of students entering RAP are indentured as apprentices prior to the end of Grade 12. Once indentured they have qualified as a school completer having entered a post secondary program of study.

New *Off-campus Education Handbook* to be Implemented in September 2009: In our present educational context, the utilization of the opportunities provided through Off-campus learning, in Work Experience, RAP and other applications, enable school systems to help students access practical learning that would otherwise not be possible for schools to offer. The new *Off-campus Education Handbook* will contribute to consistency in such programming, which will in turn improve the recognition of this type of learning, and at the same time ensure student safety.

The District has provided feedback to Alberta Education about changes that may well have an unintended but nonetheless detrimental impact on Off-campus education programs, which are critical for helping a significant number of at-risk students complete high school programming, giving them valuable, real world learning, that assists them in a successful transition.

The District places great value on the contribution of Off-campus learning in supporting successful transition of many students from school to the work place or to post secondary programs. The District has expressed a concern to Alberta Education about the requirement for increased monitoring of work sites that could undermine the intent of the guide.

CTS Evergreening Fund: The District is pleased to be able to access the CTS Evergreening Fund provided by the Provincial Government. This will enable targeted funds to modernize or tool new facilities to provide better CTS opportunities in schools.

CTS Curriculum: The District does face an on-going challenge to develop meaningful technology and trades related programming through the curricular vehicle of CTS. The current curriculum, as well as the proposed new CTS high school program of study, is not developed into a coherent and sequential set of learnings that can be easily recognized by post secondary institutions and industry. The range of programming open to a student is such that consolidation of learning in a given field is difficult to achieve. In this context the District has partnered with NAIT to develop specific CTS course sequences and programming standards that will permit district students to use CTS work done under the terms of the agreements to be recognized by NAIT and industry. Without this district level work, CTS would not be supportive of meaningful student pathways.

Of more concern is the suggested changes to the junior high CTS program. The loss of specific skill and knowledge outcomes from the proposed CTS curriculum will make it difficult, if not impossible, for meaningful practical arts learning experiences to occur with any consistency at the junior high level. This will present a barrier to school completion by creating a situation where students will unlikely be involved in types of hands-on learning that can lead to greater student engagement and encourage school completion. The lack of direction or vision for the new CTS program coupled with the lack of information being provided to school districts is limiting their ability to prepare programs to engage students and develop transition plans. This is a serious concern that the District will need to address.

3. Does your jurisdiction currently utilize the resources, research or initiatives available through ASBA? Which of these efforts have made the greatest impact? Have you worked with representative(s) from ASBA in developing initiatives for your jurisdiction? Are you aware of who to contact in ASBA for assistance?

The District does some work with committees of ASBA or with representatives of those committees.

The Second Languages committee of ASBA (ASBALE) does request occasional updates from our district in terms of work on second language implementation. As well the ASBA sends a representative to the provincial French Language Consortium, and provides information and feedback to issues raised at that forum. These interactions are helpful to both parties.

5. Future Plans

1. Please describe, in a few sentences, any plans to implement initiatives and/or system improvements anticipated to provide the greatest degree of success or promise in improving high school completion and/or reducing drop out rates. What impact do you anticipate and when is your estimated date of implementation?

The District recognizes that improving high school completion requires a focus on approaches from Kindergarten to Grade 12. As a result, the District is initiating a variety of strategies at all levels of schooling. Some examples of current initiatives are listed below. All of these initiatives have begun or will be beginning this fall. Evidence of the impact of this work will be collected on an annual basis.

- **Continued Implementation of the District’s Aboriginal Education policy and regulation:** This work is focusing on the introduction of a Cree language extended alternative program involving Elders and parents, expansion of cultural awareness training and improved transitions between school divisions.
- **Implementation of the Multicultural Task Force Recommendation:** This task force will be identifying policy and direction that will support school success and completion for students from culturally diverse backgrounds including students suffering from trauma. This work is underway and final recommendations will be approved by the Board.

- **Expanding Early Learning opportunities:** This program provides language-rich, developmentally appropriate programming that includes English Language Learning along with learning in the children’s mother tongue. Pilot locations will expand for next year. Implementation of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) will also provide useful information on the needs of young children beginning school.
 - **Workplace Essential Skills Program:** This program enables students to make a smooth transition from school to work and to be successful in a range of occupations.
 - **Analysis of school data in relation to levels of complexity in schools:** The District is analyzing data regarding levels of complexity in schools such as the degree to which families are coming from socially vulnerable areas in the city, high needs of the students and families, and additional needs students may have in terms of special needs and needs due to diversity. This information will assist in determining effective strategies of support for schools with high levels of complexity.
 - **After school, mentoring, and summer camps:** The District is working with a variety of community partners on putting in place additional supports for students who are at risk after school, during the weekends, and during the summer. These strategies will assist in engaging students who are risk in school.
2. **Could your jurisdiction be interested in attending and participating in a symposium, to be developed by ASBA in collaboration with Alberta Education, with the focus of sharing initiatives and/or system improvement processes related to this issue? What other methods could your board suggest to support sharing of information and collaboration between school boards?**

Yes

3. **If your jurisdiction has experience with implementing programs or initiatives to address these rates, would you be prepared to share these with other jurisdictions?**

- Yes
- No