

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

May 21, 2002

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Response to the Canadian School Boards Association – Accountability Discussion Paper

ORIGINATOR: M. de Man, Department Head

RESOURCE
STAFF: Gloria Chalmers, Bob Holt, Veda Lastiwka, Anne Mulgrew,
Edgar Schmidt, Stuart Wachowicz

RECOMMENDATION

That the attached letter of response from the Chairman be approved for forwarding to the Alberta School Boards Association.

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In February 2002, the Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA) prepared the *Discussion Paper on Accountability*. School boards associations affiliated with the CSBA across the country were asked to respond to the discussion paper. The feedback will contribute to the development of CSBA policy and advocacy strategies regarding accountability. The CSBA plans to create an accountability framework in response to a resolution approved at the 2001 CSBA Congress.

The Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) has prepared its initial response to the CSBA discussion paper. School jurisdictions across the province have been invited to respond to both documents. The proposed response to this request is provided in (Appendix I).

ES:ee

APPENDIX I - Proposed Response to ASBA

Proposed Response to ASBA

May 21, 2002

Dr. Leroy Sloan
Alberta School Boards Association
Suite 1200
9925 - 109 Street
Edmonton, AB T5K 2J8

Dear Dr. Sloan:

Edmonton Public Schools (EPS) regards accountability to a variety of stakeholders a critical feature of our work. We value the input various groups provide to us, and we provide comprehensive information about our district to these groups. Our district's response to the CSBA Accountability Discussion Paper is structured similarly to the discussion paper, with comments regarding the ASBA response provided as needed.

Context

Context influences the responsiveness of school boards to the demands and expectations of their respective stakeholder communities. In Alberta, the government's accountability framework is a contextual feature with significant impact on school jurisdictions. The challenge to EPS is the context of under-funding of education, with greater targeted funding that restricts local decision-making and greater accountability pressures being applied. The provincial context is that the government holds all authority regarding funding of education, and makes school boards accountable for all results, creating significant tension when responding to community needs.

Developing A Framework for Accountability

The Edmonton Public School Board believes in accountability to many stakeholders. We have an accountability framework that includes an open budget process, a key communicators program (which provides parental input to district priorities and to trustees and administration on an ongoing basis), Highest Level of Achievement Tests (HLATs), and provincial exams. The HLATs were developed to augment the provincial achievement tests to provide information of student growth over time. In addition, information is gathered and provided to staff, parents, and the community through well-developed parent, staff and student surveys.

We believe the district should be involved in the development of a provincial framework. The provincial framework should be based on a limited number of measures and indicators that are reliable, comparable across districts, focus on the most essential work of districts and be stable over time to assist districts in identifying trends and areas for improvement.

Goals and Objectives

We agree with the CSBA and ASBA goal statements on the understanding that education being accessible to all children and providing an equitable learning opportunity does not mean that all children are treated the same. EPS believes public education should serve all children but treating them the same drives them away to private and charter options.

We support local autonomy, as it is a requirement for responsiveness to the needs of constituents. We also understand the desire for some national standards to enable young people from anywhere in Canada to pursue post-secondary opportunities in any province and internationally, for that matter. Families, ideally, should be able to move across the country and know their children will receive a seamless education.

These are challenging goals and they will take some discussion, but it is a worthwhile discussion.

Goals and Outcomes

There is strong support for health and physical education as part of core education. In addition, raising the profile of second language learning is vitally important. We believe outcomes should reflect what we value most and what is essential to our mandate. The Review Committee on Outcomes has provided many outcome statements. We anticipate that as measures and indicators are developed that the intent and meaning of some of the outcomes will be clarified. Outcome statements that relate to opportunities to learn, community engagement, facilities, and leadership and governance are important. Outcomes related to teaching and the teaching profession are addressed through legislation and our own processes to ensure quality teaching.

Roles and Responsibilities

We concur with the belief that the definition of roles and responsibilities is critical to an accountability framework. Based upon the Alberta School Act, EPS provides further guidance on roles and responsibilities of stakeholders.

Accountability Measures

Student Performance and Testing

The CSBA has put forth a statement about the importance and visibility of student assessment. They also cite numerous factors that have an impact on student performance, and caution that information about student performance be used in conjunction with other measures of accountability, not as a sole measure. We would certainly concur with the importance of this position.

We also agree that every district should have an evaluation process that is fair and inclusive, and which will provide information as a district as well as a school, classroom and student level. Within our district, it was felt that there was a need to gather data in addition to what was provided by the provincial common measures. To accomplish this, the district established reading and writing tests on an annual basis for all students in grades 1 through 9. This information provides a snapshot of students' achievement every year, and allows their growth to be tracked over time. We do not agree with the CSBA statement indicating that school boards do not have a role in developing testing instruments. Our school district tests provide information regarding the extent to which we achieve our achievement goals and targets.

In our district, schools are required to examine testing data and develop an instructional focus plan to address the greatest learning needs of students. In this way, student data has a direct impact on improving teaching and learning.

The ASBA indicates the desire to conduct pilot studies to respond to this section. If the studies are to pilot measuring and reporting options and determine their effectiveness that may be useful.

Teacher Accountability Measures

The ASBA response on Teacher Accountability Measures accurately reflects the current process for ensuring teacher accountability in Alberta. EPS has developed policies and practices in concert with provincial legislation.

School Board Measures

Trustees are truly accountable through the electoral process. This democratic process requires the board of trustees to be responsive to the local community. Further centralizing of boards would result in some communities not enjoying the kind of responsiveness voters are demanding. One key function of schooling is to develop the ideals, values and practices of democracy in our society. It is important that students receive these messages within a democratic institution.

Fiscal responsibility is a critical feature of accountability. Our district engages in on-going audits in schools and district-wide. It forms part of our communication to our communities.

Site-based management is another accountability feature that is not new to EPS. Site-based decision-making was piloted in 1976 and incorporated district wide in 1980. Through this process, each school has become responsive to its immediate neighbourhood. The district has also been responsive by introducing various alternative programs, providing greater school choice.

The accountability framework should provide direction as to what we are accountable for and to whom. How we develop processes to ensure accountability should be left to school boards. The accountability measures will guide school boards in developing these processes. The processes should not be mandated.

Reporting Results

We are committed to reporting district results to parents and the Edmonton community. We understand the need to report to the public as they support education whether or not they have children in school. In addition each school provides results review information to its community annually. We recognize the need to do a better job of providing contextual information, as well as a demonstration of growth rather than simply providing a means for ranking schools. A school or school district cannot simply be judged by its test results or by its fiscal position alone. Providing meaningful information to the public in ways that capture the complexity and strength of school boards is a significant challenge.

The ASBA indicates the desire to conduct pilot studies to respond to this section. If the pilot studies are constructed to test reporting options and determine their effectiveness that may be useful.

Consequences of Poor Performance

EPS agrees that the emphasis should be on improvement plans and the need to demonstrate growth. We strongly disagree with a punitive approach as no one wins, least of all the students.

Improvement Plans

At EPS, the district and schools develop three-year plans. The plans are refined and approved through yearly updates. Improvement plans must be highly integrated in the planning and budgeting process. Improvement plans separated from a district-wide process and approach are not helpful.

Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity for input into this discussion paper. We are also prepared to provide on-going input or clarification regarding any aspect of this submission. We are committed to accountability and steps taken to refine it will be helpful.

Yours truly,

Don Fleming
Chairman