

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

May 27, 2003

TO: Board of Trustees  
FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools  
SUBJECT: Closure of Sherbrooke School as an Awasis Program Location  
ORIGINATOR: A. Habinski, Executive Director School and District Services

RESOURCE

STAFF: Donna Barrett, Jenise Bidulock, Susan Burghardt - MacNeill, Dr. Phyllis Cardinal, Andrea Furness, Roland Labbe, Donna Leask, Stephen Lynch, Doreen L'Hirondelle, Shirly McNeill, Pat Niven, Gerri Porter, Pat Semeniuk, Liz Yule

RECOMMENDATION

That the closure of Sherbrooke School as an Awasis Program location at the end of the 2002-2003 school year be approved.

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**Aboriginal Education Programming Context**

There is a large and growing urban Aboriginal population in Edmonton, and there are significant numbers of self-declared Aboriginal students attending Edmonton Public Schools. Aboriginal focused programming has been available in the district for nearly 30 years, and is now available to serve students from kindergarten through grade 12 at three sites. With the guidance and advocacy of the Aboriginal community, the Awasis Program began 28 years ago at Prince Charles School for children in kindergarten to grade 6. The Awasis Program was expanded to accommodate grades 7 to 9 at Sherbrooke School in 1998. Amiskwaciy Academy began to offer Aboriginal focused programming for grades 10-12 in 2000. Grades offered at Prince Charles School were reduced to kindergarten to 4 with the opening of the Sherbrooke site.

The Edmonton Public School District remains committed to delivering quality educational opportunities to Aboriginal students, whether they attend regular program schools or sites that offer Aboriginal focused programming. Aboriginal focused programming will continue to be offered as a choice to students from kindergarten through grade 12, however current fiscal and educational challenges have lead to the recommended program location changes at this time.

**Background to Closure Review and Consultation**

On March 25, 2003, the Board of Trustees approved a recommendation to undertake the provincial and board mandated processes to consider the feasibility of closing Sherbrooke

School as an Awasis Program site. In accordance with the School Act (Appendix I), a public meeting was held at Sherbrooke School on Tuesday, April 29, 2003 as part of the requirements of the process (Appendix II). Five trustees, district staff, and over 100 members of the community, including Elders and representatives from agencies affiliated with the Aboriginal community, attended the meeting. Since the public meeting, focus meetings have been held with Elders involved with district Aboriginal programs, with representatives from agencies who deliver services to students and families of Sherbrooke School, with school staff, and with district staff involved with Aboriginal programming in the district. By invitation of the Sherbrooke Community League, a community league meeting regarding the possible closure of Sherbrooke School was attended by Ward Trustee Lynn Odynski and a number of district staff. Two delegations in support of maintaining the Awasis Program at Sherbrooke School made presentations to the Board of Trustees on May 13, 2003.

The district has received personal letters from several Sherbrooke students involved in an after-school program for teens called 'Choices', wishing to keep the Awasis Program at Sherbrooke open. The Shumka Dancers group, who leases space in Sherbrooke School, wrote in support of keeping the Sherbrooke School Awasis Program open. One Sherbrooke community resident emailed a preference to see Sherbrooke School closed as an Awasis Program location.

A notice regarding the proposed meeting date for a decision to be made on the future of the Awasis Program at Sherbrooke School was sent to the families of students and to members of the community who registered as attendees at the April 29, 2003 public meeting (Appendix III).

### **Major Concerns and Issues**

Elders, parents, students, and agency representatives who attended the public meeting spoke to a desire to keep the Sherbrooke School location open as a site for the Awasis Program. The site is viewed as an important centre for the Aboriginal community. A recurring concern was raised in the consultation process that the continuity of programming and support systems for the students of Sherbrooke School was critical to student success, particularly those who have high needs and are at risk of not continuing their education. The unique relationship that these students have developed with the program, the teachers, the site, the Elders and the Aboriginal community, and supporting agencies and programs is fragile, and location changes could impact negatively on the students. Separating the students from an environment that they have defined as their community is challenging.

There are common concerns around the perceived hastiness and lack of advance notice of the closure discussion, a lack of consultation with the Aboriginal community, the insufficient time for the program to have established at Sherbrooke, the potential loss of staff whom the students know and have developed supportive relationships with, the need for more Aboriginal program sites rather than fewer, and the short time period in which to make a decision. There is concern that appropriate Aboriginal educational resources and supports need to be made available to all the program sites regardless of where they are, in order that they be well attended.

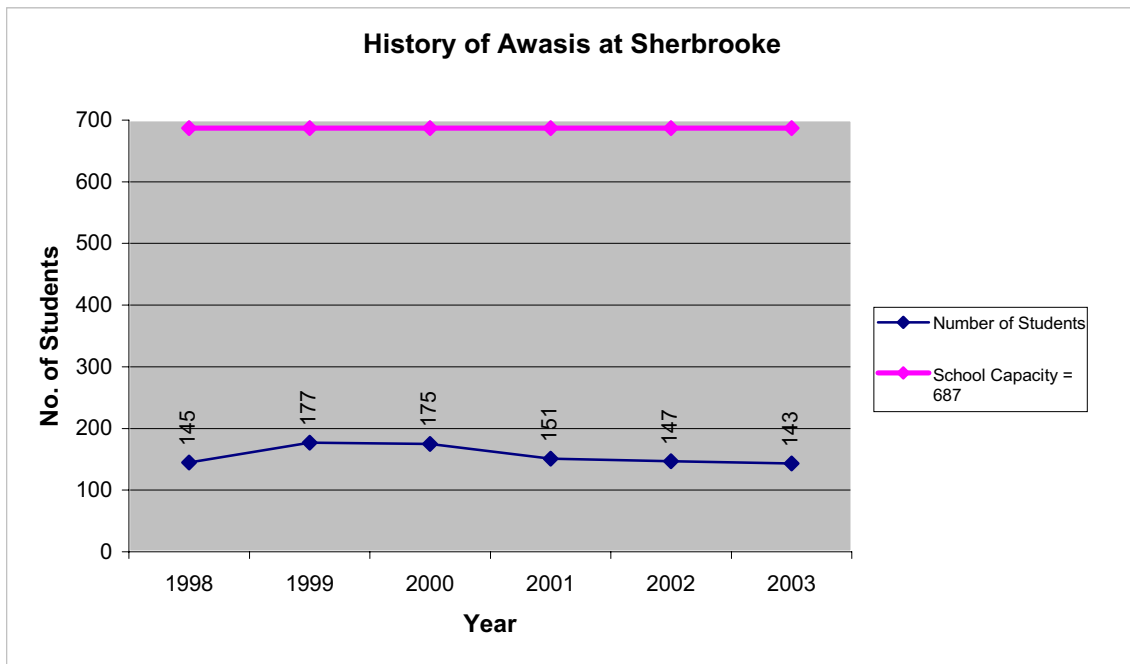
A great deal of discussion has and continues to be centered on the most appropriate grade configurations for Aboriginal program schools. The current situation is one that has divided the elementary portion of the Awasis Program between Prince Charles School (kindergarten to grade 4) and Sherbrooke School (grades 4 to 9). This arrangement is preferable to some families and undesirable to others. Past input has suggested a kindergarten to grade 9 school would be best. While this can be reviewed in the future, it would be difficult to achieve this at either Sherbrooke or Prince Charles School without major impacts on students, families or facilities. Some concern has been expressed over including junior high students with senior high school students. Regardless of grade structure, there are historical challenges to retain students through to the end of any given school year at the junior high and high school level, and Aboriginal students have a higher percentage of students who are at risk of not completing their schooling.

A number of Sherbrooke community residents and the Sherbrooke Community League have indicated that it is their preference that the Awasis Program at Sherbrooke School be closed.

**Rationale for Recommending Closure**

A total of 147 students began the current school year at Sherbrooke School, which has a capacity of 687 students. This represents a 30% building utilization rate as calculated by the province. The projected number of students for the coming school year is 143. A utilization rate under 40% is identified in the Board closure policy FL.BP as a basis for considering closure (Appendix IV).

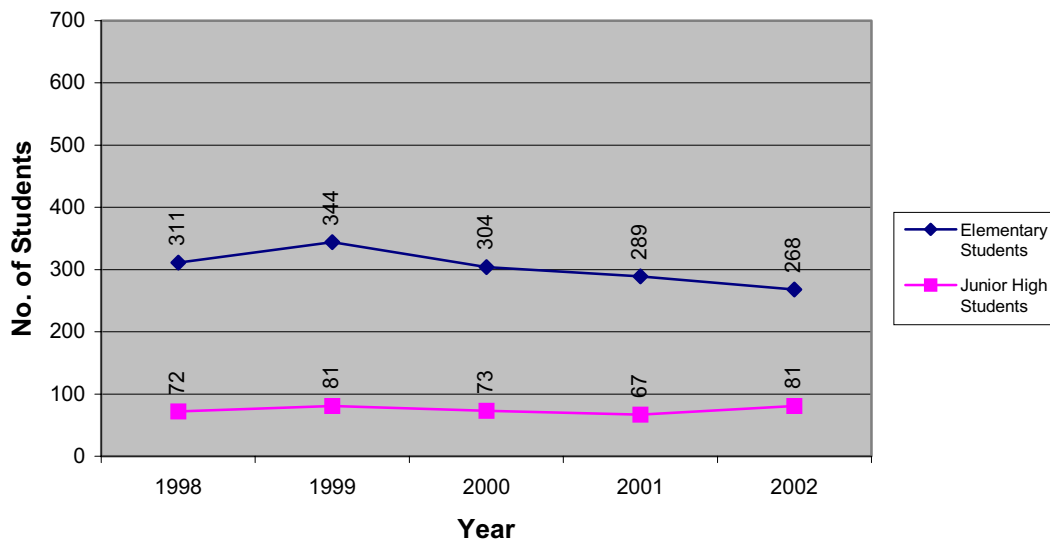
The following chart depicts the enrolment history for the Awasis Program at Sherbrooke School.



It is difficult to justify operating the Awasis Program in Sherbrooke School given the low number of students that attend it and the large capacity of the building. While achievement results and student retention have improved over the years, the small number of students reduces the ability to secure educational resources at the same level as in other district schools. The low utilization of the building has a detrimental effect on the amount of plant operating and maintenance funding made available to the district annually by the province. While the facility meets the district’s minimum facility standards, no significant capital upgrading has occurred since the school opened to Awasis Program students in 1998. The facility had been closed as an operating school site for 14 years previous to 1998. The low utilization rate for the building would make it difficult to secure future capital improvement funding from the province. Capital reinvestment will be required in the next few years if the building remains open, to ensure that minimum district facility standards can be maintained.

At the start of the current school year, 3,092 elementary and 1,426 junior high students self-identified as Aboriginal students were registered in Edmonton Public Schools. Since 1998, the number of students choosing to attend the Awasis Program has declined slightly, while the number of self-identified Aboriginal students in the district has increased.

### History of Awasis K to 9 Enrolment



Relocating the Awasis Program would increase the resources to be allocated to student learning at the program sites.

Some members of the resident Sherbrooke community indicated an interest in having Sherbrooke School reopened as a regular school. Neighbourhood demographic data and resident Sherbrooke student numbers indicate that there are insufficient numbers to meet the requirements established in the district’s reopening policy FB.BP (Appendix V).

## **Transition Plan for Accommodation of Sherbrooke Students**

It is acknowledged that this review has been initiated more quickly than desired for a community and program of this complexity due to fiscal realities in education. The following transition plan has been developed to minimize any perceived negative impact on the current Awasis students and stakeholders, with a view to improving overall service and educational programming opportunities for the Aboriginal students of the district in years to come.

If the Board of Trustees supports the closure of Sherbrooke School as an Awasis Program location, the junior high Awasis Program will be relocated to another suitable junior high site. This plan reflects the input gathered over the past weeks and is designed to maintain the continuity, supports and relationships that are in place at Sherbrooke School by proposing the relocation of the students and staff to the new site. This plan will provide the Aboriginal community with a greater range of program choices for their students and allow for the possible expansion of the Awasis Program to include kindergarten to grade 9 programming. Sites are being reviewed in consultation with the Aboriginal community. Currently, the R J Scott-Lawton Campus is showing great promise as a potential location for the Awasis Program. Other sites are also being considered.

Additionally, Amiskwaciy Academy is examining its Aboriginal focused programming organization with the possibility of including grade 7, 8 and 9 students for the 2003-2004 school year.

Students in grades 4, 5 and 6 at Sherbrooke School will be able to attend Prince Charles School. All kindergarten to grade 6 students at Prince Charles School will have a homeroom in the core building to assist with the smooth transition of the students and maintain the community spirit in the school and among the students and staff. The Music Instruction classroom and the Cree language classroom will be relocated into portables to be added to the Prince Charles School site on a temporary basis. All district portable classroom space meets or exceeds health and safety standards. Capital upgrading and expansion of Prince Charles School building will be pursued in a future district capital plan, to ensure that an adequate facility is available for kindergarten to grade 6 students who choose to attend the Awasis Program at Prince Charles School.

Continuation of student and family support services not presently available at Prince Charles School and the new junior high school site will be pursued with the current partner agencies at Sherbrooke School.

Assistance will be provided to expedite the enrolment process for students to attend a school of their choice. Student transportation will be made available to students enrolled at Sherbrooke School this year to their chosen site.

To assist in the transition, a special ceremony will be recommended to honor past efforts and acknowledge the contributions of the Aboriginal community in the development of Aboriginal programming, to honor the effort and accomplishments of those who have contributed to the establishment and growth of Aboriginal programming at Prince Charles School, Sherbrooke School and Amiskwaciy Academy, to promote the new Awasis Program

location, and to affirm the positive working relationships that Edmonton Public Schools has with the Aboriginal community.

### **Future Aboriginal Programming Approaches**

District Aboriginal Education staff will continue to ensure that shared resources, methods, practices, and student and family supports are in place and enhanced at all sites offering Aboriginal programming. Promotion and expansion of Aboriginal programming will be pursued with the goal of adding elementary and junior high sites in existing district schools where there are higher proportions of Aboriginal students. This is currently where the majority of Aboriginal students are choosing to attend school. Cree language programming and incorporation of Aboriginal content within curriculum will be promoted at future sites. Ongoing dialogue and consultation with Elders and supporting agencies in establishing and developing these sites will be the key to their success.

### **Input from the City of Edmonton**

The City of Edmonton has provided a community impact statement on the proposed closure. The following is a summary of their statement:

“It is our opinion that the closure of the Sherbrooke School will have a negligible negative impact on the surrounding community given that the community programs, sports fields and park site amenities will remain available to the public through Sherbrooke School.”

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- APPENDIX I – School Act Closure Regulations
- APPENDIX II – Notice of April 29, 2003 Public Meeting
- APPENDIX III – Notice of Board Meeting Invitation
- APPENDIX IV – Board Policy FL.BP School Closure
- APPENDIX V – Board Policy FB.BP School Reopening