

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

September 13, 2005

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Review of the 2005 School Closure Process and Policy Review

ORIGINATOR: C. McCabe, Executive Director

RESOURCE

STAFF: Jenise Bidulock, Randy Billey, Judy Bradbury, Meredith Colgan, Josephine Duquette, Michael Ediger, Leanne Fedor, Kerry-Ann Kope, Roland Labbe, Sheri-Lee Langlois, Randy Leal, Pat Niven, Cathy Pasternak, Deanne Patsula, Gerri Porter, Cindy Skolski

INFORMATION

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide:

- Information acquired through the administrative retrospective review as it relates to events leading up to and including the school closure process that resulted in the board approving the closure of North Edmonton School, Strathearn School, Terrace Heights School and Wellington School in the spring of 2005;
- A plan to complete a retrospective review from district stakeholders on the 2005 school closure process;
- Information about the process to review the district's School Closure Policy; and
- The next steps in preparing a long range Plan for School Sustainability.

Background

Student learning space in the district continues to be a resource that needs careful review and consideration in light of current local conditions and emerging funding changes in terms of Plant Operation and Maintenance (PO&M) funding. In order for the district to continue to manage "space as a resource" in a responsible manner, careful consideration must be given to long range strategies and plans to ensure optimal learning opportunities for all students in the district. These plans must incorporate the need to ensure the district maximizes spending dollars for teaching and learning in the classroom, while minimizing costs required for utilities, custodial costs and maintenance, especially for space not needing to be used by students. The administration continues to develop strategies to better enable the district to more effectively manage student learning space; both the space occupied by students, as well as space that is not currently required for student learning.

It is recognized that school closure is one approach to addressing and managing surplus student learning space in the district. During the 2004-2005 school year, Edmonton Public Schools engaged in a series of cluster studies that were then followed by the formal school closure process resulting in the closure of four district schools. The Board of Trustees requested a review of the school closure

process be conducted to gather information about what the district learned through the process last year in order to inform what might be done regarding school closures in the future.

In July 2005, the province announced a new funding formula for Plant Operations and Maintenance (PO&M). The previous funding formula had been based on the number of square meters a district had, and the new formula is based on the number of students a district has. The new formula allows more space for students in earlier grades to account for class size, and allows more space for severe special needs students. The impact of the new formula on districts will be that only the amount of student space a district ought to be using will be supported. This means that the district will still have a significant number of unfunded student spaces.

The current realities that have been identified will continue to shift the critical question for all stakeholders in the district from “How do we close schools?” to “How do we best use space as a resource?” As public stewards of educational resources, the Board of Trustees will be faced with choices around whether or not to add space to the district, or to maintain space the district does not need. The Board of Trustees will continue to be challenged to prudently address how space in the district is being used on an annual basis in order to ensure funds that are directed to unneeded space are minimized, and funds that are directed to classroom teaching and learning are maximized.

The Administrative Retrospective Review Completed

A retrospective review of the 2004-2005 cluster study and school closure processes was completed by the administration. The source of information for this review came from documents, letters, information and recommendations collected and submitted by parents, public, school staff, principals, central staff and other individuals involved in this process directly and indirectly. A chronological list of the process and actions for the cluster study (Appendix I) and the school closure process are contained in this report (Appendix II). Also included in this report are perceptions, issues and concerns identified by individual parents and the public (Appendix III) with implications for changes with regard to the future cluster studies and/or the school closure process.

The cluster studies that preceded the school closure process were designed to involve parents and members of the community in making decisions about the future of the schools in their communities. Some of the feedback received from parents and community members during the cluster study included:

- Concern expressed by some parents that they felt the process pitted schools and communities against each other in keeping their school open;
- In schools that were identified for closure, some parents and community members questioned the validity of their involvement and input into the process;
- Some parents and community members indicated they felt the cluster study process although purposeful in design, had predetermined outcomes and that the timeframe provided did not allow the opportunity for the community and school to explore viable solutions to achieve sustainability; and
- Parents and community members appreciated the opportunity to express opinions, concerns and ask questions, yet some individuals felt at times they were not being responded to in a fair and reasonable manner.

Aspects of the school closure process that have been identified for retention as a result of the administrative retrospective review include:

- Providing and maintaining open communication and access to information for parents, communities members, district staff and the administration on regular and ongoing basis throughout the process;
- The teams that were made up of central services staff that were directly assigned to clusters and specific schools provided parents, community members and school staff with direct access to information personally and through the website that was established; and
- The supportive and collective efforts of the various central decision units working together throughout the entire school closure process were a model of collaboration.

Aspects of the school closure process that were identified through the administrative retrospective review, that should be addressed in any future processes, include:

- The urgent need to align the Board Policy FL.BP School Closure with the School Act and *Closure of Schools Regulation*;
- A clearly defined district criteria should be established and shared publicly that specifically identifies factors and considerations taken into account as to when and why schools may be considered for closure;
- Schools identified for closure using the established district criteria should be identified on an individual basis, although considered in the context of other schools in the area;
- Pre-closure communication or input processes should be clearly defined in terms of intent and purpose to the public, and coordinated to ensure they are not confused with part of the school closure process;
- A comprehensive communication plan with parents and community members to inform them of the current issues, challenges and state of affairs of the district should be devised;
- The closure of schools in the district in the future should be coordinated along timelines that are not restrictive in terms of process and time in relationship to the district's pre-enrolment process; and
- A well researched long term sustainability plan should be put in place for the district that looks beyond school closures as the primary solution in addressing the sustainability of schools and in managing the surplus student learning space in the district.

The Plan to Complete the Retrospective Review of the School Closure Process

In addition to the administrative retrospective review, a further retrospective review to seek input from district stakeholders on the past school closure process is planned. This review will include the conduct interviews that will involve:

- Selected school council chairs from key communicators advisory committee, closed schools, receiving schools, and schools that are at capacity
- Principals of receiving schools, closed schools, schools that are receiving schools for outlying areas
- School staff of receiving schools
- School staff of closed schools, and of other schools,
- Superintendent's council

Planning and Communications staff are currently in the process of identifying key issues that will be addressed through the review and working with external research consultants to formulate questions around these issues for discussion during the above interviews.

The process to gather input from the identified focus groups will commence in September 2005 with the results being provided to the administration and the Board of Trustees in October 2005.

The Plan to Review Edmonton Public Schools District School Closure Policy

In September 2005, it is the intent of the administration to work with the district Policy Review Committee, to review and initiate the process required for a formal policy review of Board Policy FL.BP. As was identified during the school closures in June 2005, an alignment of the policy to the School Act, *Closure of School Regulations* and to the current conditions is urgently required.

Aspects of the current district school closure policy that need to be addressed and altered include:

- Space utilization
- Enrolment
- Operational standards and costs

There is an urgency to complete this policy review, and make necessary modifications, to ensure the policy is aligned with the School Act and with the *Closure of Schools Regulations*, for implementation of the new policy in the 2005-2006 school year.

- Discrepancies in the School Closure Regulation

The Provincial school closure regulation was problematic for Edmonton Public Schools throughout the last school closure process. The district will request that Alberta Education alter its school closure regulations to reduce ambiguity in some of the current ones.

Long Range Plan for School Sustainability

Next steps in the process to address the issues of school sustainability and the need to manage student learning space in the district involves further work and follow-up with regard to the process and policy reviews addressed in this report. The administration is currently developing a long range sustainability plan that will provide multiple strategies and approaches to better rationalize and manage student learning space in our district. This plan will include a public input and communication process and is entitled, *School Sustainability and Revitalization*. This plan would address school closure in terms of identifying criteria for school closure and, defining a process with timelines and considerations with regard to public involvement. The Board of Trustees will be considering a draft plan and input strategy in the fall.

RB:CS:pn

- Appendix I Cluster Study Process Chronology
- Appendix II School Closure Process Chronology
- Appendix III The Administrative Retrospective Review–Information from Parents and Community Members

Cluster Study Process Chronology

Date	Action
December 14, 2004	Report went to board titled Addressing Student Programming Needs in Clusters of Schools with Low Enrollment - APPROVED
January 5	Meeting with principals of schools involved in cluster studies
January 7	Letter home to parents with children in cluster study schools
January 17	Combined school council meeting at Balwin School
January 19	Combined school council meeting at Wellington School
January 20	Combined school council meeting at Hardisty School
January 24	Individual school council meeting at McArthur School
January 31	Communications with parents re consultation meetings
January 31	Staff meeting with Cluster B staff at Wellington School
February 1	Staff meeting with Cluster C staff at Terrace Heights School
February 3	Staff meeting with Cluster A staff at Balwin School
February 8	Individual school council meetings at Athlone, Balwin, Fulton Place and Strathearn Schools'
February 8	Individual school council meetings at Terrace Heights and Forest Heights Schools
February 9	Parent/community consultation meeting at Wellington School
February 14	Individual school council meeting at North Edmonton School
February 15	Individual school council meetings at Hardisty School, Princeton School and Wellington School Band Association
February 16	Parent/community consultation meeting at Balwin School
February 17	Parent/community consultation meeting at Hardisty School
March 8	PUBLIC BOARD MEETING
	Board considers recommendations from arising from the Athlone, McArthur and Wellington Schools' Cluster Study RECOMMENDATION TO BEGIN SCHOOL CLOSURE FOR WELLINGTON SCHOOL - CARRIED
	Board considers recommendations arising from the Balwin, North Edmonton and Princeton Schools' Cluster Study RECOMMENDATION TO BEGIN SCHOOL CLOSURE PROCESS FOR NORTH EDMONTON SCHOOL - CARRIED
	Board considers recommendations arising from the Forest Heights, Fulton Place, Hardisty, Strathearn and Terrace Heights Schools' Cluster Study – Terrace Heights RECOMMENDATION TO BEGIN SCHOOL CLOSURE PROCESS FOR TERRACE HEIGHTS SCHOOL – CARRIED
	RECOMMENDATION TO BEGIN SCHOOL CLOSURE PROCESS FOR STRATHEARN SCHOOL – CARRIED
	RECOMMENDATION TO START SCHOOL CLOSURE PROCESS FOR HARDISTY SCHOOL - DEFEATED

School Closure Process Chronology

Date	Action
March 18	Posters advertising public meets sent to schools for display in five or more conspicuous places
March 19, 26 and April 2	Ads - Public meetings re school closure – Edmonton Journal
March 23 and 30	Ads - Public meetings re school closure – Edmonton Examiner
March 20 and 27	Ads - Public meetings re school closure – Edmonton Sun
March 26	Flyer drop to neighbourhoods re public meetings
April 5	Public meeting re possible closure of Wellington School
April 6	Public meeting re possible closure of North Edmonton School
April 7	Public meeting re possible closure of Terrace Heights School
April 11	Public meeting re possible closure of Strathearn School
May 10	PUBLIC BOARD MEETING Board Meeting to consider recommendation of school closures RECOMMENDATION TO CLOSE TERRACE HEIGHTS SCHOOL AT THE END OF THE 2004-2005 SCHOOL YEAR – CARRIED
	Injunction by parents prevents board from considering motions for closure of Wellington, Strathearn and North Edmonton Schools’
May 13	Media Conference - Board announces they will continue with the school closure process and have additional public meetings Letter sent home to parents via students from Superintendent outlining the injunction and reasons for continuing the school closure process Letter sent to schools being considered for closure and receiving schools Posters advertising public meets sent to schools for display in five or more conspicuous places
May 18 and 25	Ads - Public meetings re school closure at Centre for Education – Edmonton Examiner
May 20 and 27	Ads - Public meetings re school closure at Centre for Education – Edmonton Journal
May 22 and 29	Ads - Public meetings re school closure at Centre for Education – Edmonton Sun
May 30	Additional public meeting at Centre for Education to consider the closure of North Edmonton School
May 31	Additional public meeting at Centre for Education to consider the closure of Strathearn School
June 2	Additional public meeting at Centre for Education to consider the closure of Wellington School
June 23	Parents withdraw their lawsuit and consent to lifting of injunction
June 28	SPECIAL BOARD MEETING Board considers recommendations arising from the School Closure Process. RECOMMENDATION TO CLOSE NORTH EDMONTON SCHOOL AT THE END OF THE 2004-2005 SCHOOL YEAR – CARRIED RECOMMENDATION TO CLOSE WELLINGTON SCHOOL AT THE END OF THE 2004-2005 SCHOOL YEAR – CARRIED RECOMMENDATION TO CLOSE STRATHEARN SCHOOL AT THE END OF THE 2004-2005 SCHOOL YEAR – CARRIED

The Administrative Retrospective Review – Information from Parents and Community Members

The following are some of the perceptions, concerns and issues expressed by parents and community members with regard to the cluster study and school closure process:

- The manner in which utilization rates were calculated and their validity came into question for a number of parents. It was felt by some that these figures did not accurately represent the true picture and that Alberta Infrastructure's formula and approach to calculating these figures was flawed.
- Some parents and community members felt the cluster study component lacked opportunity for dialogue with facilitators and trustees.
- Parents and community members voiced concerns that some felt the cluster study and the school closure process were not logical and they were not transparent.
- Some parents indicated they had no previous knowledge that the sustainability of their school was in question and their school was being considered for closure prior to the cluster/ closure process.
- Parents stated, Edmonton Public Schools did not provide schools and communities with a fair and reasonable amount of time to identify and formulate strategies that may have resulted in solutions that could have avoided their school being closed.
- It was perceived by some parents that the district was closing their school in order to enable the district to build new schools in new neighbourhoods.
- Educational cases that were provided were not accepted by parents. They did not support that school closure would enhance the learning opportunities for their children by placing them in a larger and more populated setting.
- It was felt by some parents that Edmonton Public Schools was not supporting schools identified for closure through their unwillingness to initiate such strategies as moving alternative programs to their school, providing better access to transportation, and altering existing attendance boundaries to benefit their school.
- Parents questioned why we would close schools that they felt were in good condition.
- It was felt by parents that it made no sense to move students from schools with extra learning space available to schools that they perceived were overcrowded and could not accommodate additional students.
- Parents and community members felt the deteriorating conditions of some of the schools that were identified for closure contributed to them being closed and accused the district as failing to maintain the physical components of these schools over time.
- It was recognized by parents that the district needs to adopt a long term strategy and plan to address the issues of declining enrolment and the issue of surplus student learning space in the district. It was pointed out that school closure was only one strategy and the district needed to explore other strategies, such as leases, deconstruction of surplus space and other creative and innovative solutions before considering closure.