

## EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

September 26, 2006

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: L. Thomson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Addressing Programming Challenges for Students with Special Education Needs

ORIGINATOR: D. Barrett, Executive Director

RESOURCE  
STAFF: Deborah Brandell, Janet Thomas

### INFORMATION

#### **Introduction**

Every day district staff set priorities and make timely and effective decisions to support student programming. For students with special education needs these decisions take place within a complex environment of evolving understandings, demands and mandates. The district offers parents strong programming options to meet the special education needs of students. This report provides a classroom example and several scenarios to give a context for special education in the district. The report also summarizes challenges of programming for students with special education needs and outlines district goals and initiatives addressing each challenge.

#### **Every Class Has a Range of Needs**

In every class students demonstrate a range of skills, abilities and needs. Many students benefit from basic programming, some need differentiated programming, and a few require specialized assessment or special interventions. Students with special education needs require accommodations to regular programming.

Let's visit a class in a community school. This fall, 25 students entered this classroom to begin their school year. As the teacher observed, assessed, and learned about her students, she identified a range of education needs:

- Two students excelled, showing very advanced achievement levels.
- Many students achieved at grade level. One of these students demonstrated behavioural challenges.
- A few students seemed to struggle or lack confidence in literacy or numeracy skills. One of these students seemed highly inattentive and her parents were very concerned.

#### **Programming for an Individual Student**

The teacher in this classroom looked closely at the profile of each student with special education needs. One student appeared to struggle in literacy development and seemed highly inattentive. Her parents expressed concern about achievement and behavior. The student:

- appeared distractible and active, had difficulty following oral directions;
- benefited from one-on-one assistance/instruction;
- read significantly below grade level;
- infrequently completed written tasks;
- appeared to have advanced computer skills; and
- showed a desire to do well and be accepted.

The teacher discussed with parents a plan for immediate classroom support including specific steps to increase focus, develop literacy skills and build home-school communication. The teacher also discussed and proposed referrals for specialized assessment and recommendations. Parents agreed to referrals to learn more about their child's needs and to aid in appropriate programming. District consultants conducted assessments. The results and recommendations were discussed in a case conference with parents and school staff.

Based on information gleaned, teacher and parents teamed to create an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) for the student. Throughout the year, parents and school staff continue to talk about student growth, achievement, programming and placement. The process takes different directions depending on progress and parent choice:

- The student's pediatrician recommends a medication trial to support learning and home behaviour. A consultant provides support and facilitates meetings to monitor progress.
- With supports in place the student makes great strides. Teacher and parents monitor IPP, discuss and refine approaches.
- The student continues to experience difficulty in reading. A conference is convened to plan further intervention. After discussing community school and district programming choices parents choose to pursue Strategies eligibility. The school completes and submits eligibility forms. After reviewing documentation, Budget Services notifies the school of eligibility approval. In the spring, the school arranges a parent/student visit to a Strategies class and facilitates a smooth transition for the student to her new school.

Each student presents a unique set of learning needs. A collaborative approach is important in providing supports appropriate to each individual student. Creating a successful learning environment for each student is dependent on many factors, including staying current with research based best practices.

### **Programming Options and Parent Choice**

The district offers parents strong programming options to meet the special education needs of students. Inclusive community school programming, district centre programming in community schools, and specialized district centre programs are available. A range of district supports are provided to enhance programming. The following scenarios give some examples of district programming choices and supports for students with special education needs.

<b>Special Education Programming Scenarios</b>	
Inclusive Programming in Community Schools	District Centre Programming in Community Schools and Specialized Centres
Sarah, a student with Asperger’s Syndrome works with peers in a community school class. She is supported by consultants, an IPP, communication book, and classroom buddy. Sarah achieves at grade level with accommodations for note-taking, cooperative learning and testing.	J. C., a junior high student with behavior and learning needs, attends a district centre class with additional support and small class size. He has shown progress toward his IPP goals, so is included in regular programming for part of the day. He is working toward full inclusion next year.
Fima is a Kindergarten child with Downs Syndrome. Her family recently came to Canada. Fima attends her community school Kindergarten. She and her teacher have support from Program Unit Funding and Early Education Outreach.	Blair was born with severe, complex medical needs. He requires intensive medical interventions such as tube feeding, toileting and suctioning. In his district centre class nursing support, physical therapists and educational staff assist in programming.
Billy attends his community school, using a wheelchair due to physical disabilities. The school was modified for accessibility. Billy exceeds grade level expectations. His teacher has support from an adaptive physical education consultant.	Jane was deaf from birth, but demonstrates exceptional mathematical giftedness. She attends the School for the Deaf, and with the help of a signing aide, is enrolled in Math 30 and Physics 30 in a nearby high school.

**Challenges in Meeting Special Education Needs of Students**

Below five areas of challenge are summarized. District goals and initiatives addressing each challenge are outlined.

**1. Implementing What We Know About Special Education Needs**

The past two decades have seen a dramatic increase in special education research. Experts continually re-define types of disabilities, spectrum disorders, intellectual delays and giftedness. From the research the following important generalizations have emerged:

- Virtually every classroom has students with special education needs. Every teacher needs to have some understanding of special education needs and the ability to differentiate programming to meet these needs.
- Most successful student outcomes come with early and appropriate identification and intervention.
- Single educational approaches are less effective than several in concert.
- Communicating and maintaining appropriately high expectations promotes growth and achievement.

These generalizations have implications for district work. Knowing that every teacher is a teacher of students with special education needs makes supports for teacher learning a district priority. At the same time, early intervention is crucial so the district is involved in developing a systemic, district-wide plan including combined approaches such as full-day kindergarten, Reading Recovery and other strong reading programs. While implementing training and early intervention efforts, the district is re-examining all

district practices to advance early assessment and identification, so that programming needs are addressed in a timely manner.

The growing body of research creates a mix of awareness, understanding, demands and complexity. For example:

- With a deeper understanding of special education needs, parents and educators have growing expectations for expertise, programs, programming and support. Generalists and special education teachers need support to meet expectations. The district is addressing this challenge, for example, by providing Alberta School Improvement (AISI) modules in differentiation and literacy. The district is building capacity to meet demands for specialized staff, services and assistive technology. Parents and advocacy groups contribute through Parents as Partners programs and participation in ongoing programming reviews.
- Awareness results in requests for specific programming approaches such as Early Education, Early Education Outreach, and programs for students with behavioural disorders, autism, Asperger's syndrome, non verbal learning disabilities, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. Planning staff are re-examining and creating processes to ensure a valid approach to program distribution that meets a range of needs in a fiscally responsible manner.
- Maintaining a current research base is fundamental to effective programming for students with special education needs. Research Services, Consulting Services and ongoing programming reviews assist staff in these areas. The district continues to build expertise of specialized staff.

## **2. *Implementing and Monitoring Standards***

Alberta Education's *Standards for Special Education, Amended June 2004* mandate requirements that must be implemented and monitored by the district. Some requirements for reports, communication and eligibility review result in additional work for teachers and increase costs. For example, it takes time to write and implement an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) for each student with special education needs. The district is assisting with these challenges by examining types of assessments and reports that best support student learning. The district created a School Information System (SIS) IPP template, teacher guidebook and training and support for IPP development.

## **3. *Financial Realities***

Although the province has provided increased funding related to programming for students with severe special needs, funding has not kept pace with demands and costs.

- One example of a requirement for additional funding stems from an expanding research on a range of spectrum disorders. Understanding of these disorders has resulted in awareness of more students with mild or moderate special education needs. Some meet Alberta Education definitions, but others are diagnosed without meeting criteria. There is an expectation for programming to address learning needs whether or not the student meets Alberta Education or district eligibility for coding.
- The province's current funding model supports preschool identification and intervention but does not support, to the same level, district efforts at the primary elementary level.

There are financial realities involved in providing programming for students with special education needs. For instance, as staffing costs increase, so does class size. In the past, for example, 12 students attended a Strategies or Literacy class, supported by a teacher and teacher assistant. Now the norm is a class of 16 students, often with part time teacher assistant support.

The district continues to make representations to Alberta Education with regard to funding.

#### **4. *Making Decisions in this Environment***

In this complex environment, a delicate balancing act is required to set district priorities and make decisions. The district has identified the following goals as a basis for several interconnected district initiatives. The goals focus on:

- providing a range of ongoing and proactive supports, rather than relying on remediation;
- advancing inclusive and centre-based choices;
- providing effective supports for all staff (all teachers need to understand and skillfully differentiate to meet the needs of students with special education needs) while balancing financial and time commitments; and
- ensuring that the core work of supporting students with special education needs is advanced in response to and in collaboration with parent and advocacy groups.

#### **5. *Moving Forward***

The district believes that every student has a right to appropriate learning experiences in learning environments that develop individual potential. To move forward in the area of special education, the district has identified these objectives for specific attention within current district initiatives:

##### Identification of Students with Special Education Needs

- promote understanding of identification as a first step to appropriate programming;
- develop sound criteria to find students with special education needs before they struggle;
- working with Alberta Education to refine definitions;
- determine assessments necessary, appropriate and helpful to programming; and
- determine key supports for schools as they undertake early identification.

##### Programming to Meet the Special Education Needs of Students

- maintain high expectations for students identified as having special education needs;
- develop/implement systemic approach supporting equitable access across the district;
- support strong educational programming in every classroom to meet a range of needs;
- define/describe effective strategies, guidelines, expectations for effective research-based programming; and
- implement practices to support aboriginal and at-risk students.

##### Accountability for Programming

- develop sound measures of and accountability for achievement and other educational outcomes; determine how IPPs may be used in this work;

- develop method for district monitoring of student outcomes and programming effectiveness within school-based decision making model; and
- advance, monitor and evaluate district programming expectations.

#### Financial Challenges Related to Programming for Students with Special Education Needs

- use current funding to maximum effect for students;
- determine links between identification, programming needs and allocation;
- develop allocation model to provide adequate equitable programming, supporting inclusion and other choices; and
- consider ways to defray assessment costs to promote early identification.

These challenges are part of inter-related initiatives collaboratively undertaken by school and central services staff. Some initiatives such as programming reviews, review of the basis of allocation and work of internal and external working committees focus on addressing issues and forming practice. Others examine what we know about students with special education needs and take steps to build systemic supports for early identification and intervention. These include initiatives such as the English Language Learner Centre, City Centre Education Project, and full-day kindergarten. Because every teacher is a teacher of students with special education needs, plans are underway through the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) to support professional development in differentiation.

#### **Summary**

There are many challenges in providing strong research-based programming options for students with special education needs. Recent research increases awareness and understanding and generalizations help set direction, for instance, advancing early identification and intervention. Increased understanding also leads to competing demands and growing expectations. Within this complex environment the district is moving forward to support every teacher and student in every classroom, in inclusive and district centre settings. Every teacher needs to have some understanding of students with special education needs and the skills required to provide appropriate learning experiences in learning environments that develop individual potential.

DE:km