

DATE: September 22, 2015

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Interim Reading Assessment (Response to Request for Information #087)

ORIGINATOR: Dr. Sandra Stoddard, Executive Director, Strategic Support Services

RESOURCE STAFF: Janice Aubry, Sonia Bector

REFERENCE: March 3, 2015 Board Meeting (Trustee Gibson)
[GK.BP: Student Assessment, Achievement and Growth](#)
[GKB.AR: Standards for Evaluation](#)
[Implementation Guide for Communicating Student Achievement and Growth](#)

ISSUE

On March 3, 2015, the following information was requested by Trustee Gibson: *Provide information on the status of the District's thinking around interim reading assessments; e.g. we had HLATs at one time, are they still current?*

BACKGROUND

District teachers have been assessing reading levels of students for several decades. From 1995-2013, the District administered the Highest Level of Achievement Test (HLAT) for reading. District-wide implementation of the HLAT for reading was suspended after the spring 2013 implementation, as the norms were no longer considered valid, no longer reflected the diversity of current student demographics, and the test was generally deemed to be out-of-date. It was recommended that the resources previously allocated to HLAT reading be used for the examination and adoption or development of an alternative District reading assessment tool.

In 2013, the Research, Data and Knowledge (RDK) department gathered and analyzed information from various sources to make recommendations for replacements and identified the potential usefulness of the Canadian Achievement Test (CAT-4) for determining achievement in both reading and numeracy. The CAT-4 was piloted in District schools in February 2014, with generally positive results. At that time, the District Support Team determined that the recommendation for CAT-4 to replace HLAT would not be supported as a consultant with the Canadian Test Centre advised that CAT-4 was not designed to be a diagnostic tool and the approximate cost for District-wide Grade 1 to 12 administration of the CAT-4 ranged from \$350,000 to \$560,000 per year; depending on the number of students being tested and the specific components provided by the vendor.

In 2014-2015, under direction from the Superintendent, a committee was established to:

- Consider the findings of the RDK department;
- Gather and analyze school-based information regarding processes and tools already in use in the District for identifying students' levels of reading;
- Examine possible tools for consistent identification and communication of individual student reading levels across the District; and

- Develop teaching resources and professional learning to support teachers in providing intervention support to students not reading at grade level.

Considerations for this committee included:

- Student needs and student diversity impacting reliability of formal or external tests;
- The limited availability of additional District and school funds to implement a standardized reading test and the sustainability of these funds from year to year;
- Existing teacher capacity to identify whether students are at, above or below grade level in reading;
- Teacher workload;
- The challenges experienced with the implementation of the SLAs and the impact introducing another diagnostic test would have across the District;
- Existing processes that are already in place to determine reading levels; and
- The work undertaken District-wide to implement GK.BP: Student Assessment, Achievement and Growth and GKB.AR: Standards for Evaluation.

The findings of the working group revealed that over the last decade, the District has significantly invested in literacy professional learning and has begun to build capacity, especially in the elementary grades, for teachers to determine whether students are reading at, above or below grade level. Research-based tools, such as those developed by Fountas and Pinnell, are currently used in most District elementary schools. These research-based tools provide information regarding individual student reading levels and are also used to support effective literacy development and best practices in reading instruction. Formal intervention supports such as Reading Recovery® and Leveled Literacy Intervention have been implemented in District elementary schools, and involve the use of reliable tools that teachers use to determine student reading levels. In consultation with an elementary focus group, comprised of principals and lead teachers, it was agreed that District-wide implementation of an external reading test would not be the preferred choice for moving forward. External standardized tests are typically costly, not aligned to the Alberta programs of study and are not a part of day-to-day teaching practice. Alternatively, it was felt that the development of common District tools that further support teachers to accurately and reliably assess a student's reading level as part of the ongoing teaching and learning process, would have the greatest impact on student growth in reading.

The findings of the working group also suggested that additional support for determining grade level of reading at the secondary levels is required. While tools are available to support teachers in determining reading levels, challenges currently exist; some of which are highlighted below:

- The existing tools used for assessing reading levels at the secondary levels have not yet been reliably correlated to provincial programs of study and provincial grade levels.
- Current junior high school and high school practices that are in place significantly differ from site to site.
- Consistent, systematic assessment of student grade levels of reading is not evident across all schools.
- As secondary teachers approach instruction through the lens of subject specific instruction, the teaching of reading best practices can often get overlooked. Development of grade level indicators, that can support reading assessment and instruction across subject specific areas, would be beneficial.

Further work would need to occur to establish a plan to prepare secondary school staff for effective, reliable and consistent implementation of a grade level reading assessment and reporting process across all schools.

CURRENT SITUATION

Reading is critical to school and lifelong success. As such, the District is developing additional ways to support this essential life skill through a District-wide focus on reading. Collaborative work continues with teachers and principals to further develop and implement practical and effective resources and instructional practices in the area of reading.

Throughout the spring and summer, the District developed draft curriculum-aligned grade level reading guidelines with indicators and descriptors based on the Alberta program of studies for Grades 1 to 6. These curriculum-aligned resources will support teachers in consistently reporting grade level of reading across all elementary schools for all elementary students, beginning in June 2016. No new District-wide reading testing program will be implemented to replace the HLAT. Teachers will continue to use assessment tools being used at their schools, with the additional support of the newly developed curriculum-aligned support materials. In this approach, honouring teacher professional judgment and capacity is the focus. Professional learning opportunities will be provided throughout the 2015-2016 school year for teachers to further develop their skills - incorporating the curriculum they are already using and the skills they already have to accurately and consistently assess whether students are reading at, above, or below grade level. The principals and lead teachers that were consulted, felt having a full year, was a supportive strategy that honoured teacher workload and current capacity and was an opportunity to increase professional capital across the District by ensuring every elementary teacher has the same basic skills in assessing and analyzing student reading. Common professional learning, supports and tools will build consistency, equity and accountability across the District in aligning research-based assessment practices to the area of reading. This aligns with GK.BP, GKB.AR and the Implementation Guide for Communicating Student Achievement and Growth.

District-wide reporting of whether students in Grades 7 to 12 are at, above or below grade level in reading will occur in June 2017. The complexity of reading at the secondary level requires a more detailed implementation plan and the development of curriculum-aligned resources. A 1.0 full time equivalent (FTE) teacher consultant has been assigned to lead this work with involvement of school staff.

In addition, volunteer cohorts of elementary and secondary schools will participate in a two-year pilot to explore ways in which the reading levels reported in June can support the development of student intervention plans and the implementation of intervention strategies during 2015-2017. This pilot will be valuable for informing the District on strategies that are effective in providing the following year's teacher with information on students that may require additional reading interventions and supports. It also may be a future mechanism for determining, over time, if reading intervention strategies used in schools are resulting in more students reading at grade level. Learnings from this pilot will be shared District-wide.

Two principal advisory committees have been formed - one for elementary and one for secondary schools. A central advisory committee has also been formed to support the work. These committees will meet monthly throughout 2015-2016 to guide this work.

This District-wide focus on reading is grounded in the District's cornerstone values of collaboration, equity, integrity and accountability. It reflects a valuing of teacher expertise and professional judgment, includes strong elements of individual and collective accountability, and supports the building of teacher capacity for determining reading levels and supporting improved student reading.

Other potential benefits include:

- Increased teacher capacity to provide quality literacy-focused programming, assessment and interventions for students.
- Increased teacher capacity to have meaningful conversations with both students and their parents around literacy progress and growth.
- Consistency in information provided to parents regarding student reading levels.
- The ability for District-wide capturing and monitoring of student reading data including students achieving at below grade level, and student reading growth over time, with minimal impact on the workload of schools, and with minimal central staff time required.
- Reducing the perception of additional teacher workload through the administration of further external tests.
- Annual cost savings achieved through not purchasing of the CAT-4 test administration services.
- The ability to use existing consultant supports available to leadership groups to support school implementation and teacher capacity-building.

KEY POINTS

- Over the last decade, the District has supported opportunities for literacy professional learning; teachers have developed significant capacity, especially in the elementary grades to determine reading levels and to support student reading development.
- In April 2013, the District-wide implementation of the HLAT Reading Assessment was suspended. No new District-wide reading testing program will be implemented to replace it. Teachers will continue to use assessment tools being used at their schools, with the additional support of newly developed curriculum-aligned support materials, to determine whether or not their students are reading at grade level relative to the Alberta programs of study.
- Reporting whether students are at, above or below grade level in reading will occur in June 2016 for students in Grades 1 to 6 and in June 2017 for students in Grades 7 to 12.
- A link on Staffroom <https://portal-staffroom.epsb.ca/k-12-literacy> has been created to assist with communication regarding this District-wide reading focus, along with a share site <https://sites.google.com/a/epsb.ca/crs-district-reading-initiative/> that will host information and teaching materials to support schools in reporting grade level of reading.
- Volunteer cohorts of elementary and secondary schools will participate in a two-year pilot additionally developing student intervention plans and implementing intervention strategies during 2015-2017. Learnings from this pilot will be shared District-wide.
- Two principal advisory committees have been formed - one for elementary and one for secondary schools. A central advisory committee has also been formed to support the work. These committees will meet monthly throughout 2015-2016 to guide this work.
- Teacher professional judgment is valued and is key to this work.
- This initiative supports District Priority 1, Goal Two: Success for Every Student.