

**DATE:** October 8, 2019

**TO:** Board of Trustees

**FROM:** Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

**SUBJECT:** Strategic Plan Update: Early Years

**ORIGINATOR:** Nancy Petersen, Managing Director, Strategic District Supports

**RESOURCE STAFF:** Clarice Anderson, Husna Foda, Tricia Giles-Wang, Alvina Mardhani-Bayne, Carrie Millar, Bob Morter, Ann Parker, Natalie Prytuluk, Soleil Surette

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## ISSUE

The purpose of this Strategic Plan Update report is to provide the Board of Trustees with an overview of early learning, focusing on work being done with the Kitaskinaw Education Authority (KEA) of Enoch Cree Nation.

## BACKGROUND

In 2018, Edmonton Public Schools formally reaffirmed the District Strategic Plan for the 2018-2022 term. The District Strategic Plan has three priority areas with supporting goals and outcomes. The plan provides common direction and alignment between the work of the Board of Trustees, the Superintendent of Schools and District staff. The plan serves as the foundation for a District culture of evidence-based decision making, assurance and accountability.

To demonstrate the District's commitment to transparency and accountability, Strategic Plan Update reports were introduced in 2016–2017 as an extension of the Annual Education Results Report (AERR). The reports are intended to provide the Board of Trustees with detailed progress towards the goals and outcomes of our Strategic Plan.

## CURRENT SITUATION

This Strategic Plan Update report highlights the collaborative work of the District and KEA as well as other early learning initiatives in the District that provide children and families with access to high quality early years education and is in direct response to Priority 1 of the 2018-2022 District Strategic Plan for the District to foster growth and success for every student by supporting their journey from early learning through high school completion and beyond.

## KEY POINTS

This Strategic Plan Update report provides the Board of Trustees with an overview of work in support of early years.

## ATTACHMENTS and APPENDICES

ATTACHMENT I Strategic Plan Update: Family Engagement

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# Strategic Plan Update:

## Early Years

October 8, 2019

# INTRODUCTION

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This Early Years Strategic Plan Report provides the Board of Trustees with an update on early learning in the District, with a focus on work being done in partnership with the Kitaskinaw Education Authority (KEA) of Enoch Cree Nation. KEA and the District are working together on the *Exploring Early Learning & Family Engagement: A Professional Learning Partnership Between Enoch Cree Nation and Edmonton Public Schools* three-year grant project. Priority 1 of the 2018-2022 Strategic Plan calls for the District to foster growth and success for every student by supporting their journey from early learning through high school completion and beyond. In alignment with the provincial Business Plan for Education Outcome 2: *Alberta's education system supports First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students' success*, District Priority 1 includes work to address the systemic gaps in education for self-identified First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students beginning in the earliest years.

As previously presented to the Board on April 10, 2018, in the [Strategic Plan Update Report: Priority 1 Goal One: An Excellent Start to Learning](#) several meta-analyses of early learning demonstrate that attending a high quality early childhood program is a strong predictor of improved social, mental, physical and educational outcomes (Alexander & Ignjatovic, 2012; Center on the Developing Child, 2009; OECD 2017.)

The OECD report, *Promising Practices in Supporting Success for Indigenous Students*, identifies six areas of policies and practices critical to improving achievement for Indigenous students, including high quality early learning and the active involvement of families in their child's learning (Ibid., p. 117). The OECD report indicates that *high quality, tailored and responsive early childhood education can ensure Indigenous children develop the language skills and emotional stability needed to develop well and to be ready to start school on the same footing as other children* (Ibid., p. 118). Additionally, it speaks to the importance of the active involvement of families in their children's learning: *a way to accelerate student learning is to help families actively support their children's learning* (Ibid., p. 124).

Following the overview of the work being done in collaboration with the Kitaskinaw Education Authority of Enoch Cree Nation, this report also provides an update on other early learning initiatives in the District that provide children and families with access to high quality early years education.

The provision of high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) that is responsive to the needs of individual children and their families, can significantly lift students' achievement levels in later schooling

(OECD 2017, p.19)

# EXPLORING EARLY LEARNING AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

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In the spring of 2018, the District and KEA of Enoch Cree Nation partnered in applying for an Alberta Education Innovation in First Nations Education grant to fund the project: *wahkotowin: Exploring Early Learning & Family Engagement*. This joint application was successful, with grant funding being allocated to support a three-year project running from September 2018 to June 2021. This three-year grant reflects a partnership with District staff from Early Years, Research and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education working collaboratively with staff from KEA in support of the *Exploring Early Learning & Family Engagement: A Professional Learning Partnership Between Enoch Cree Nation and Edmonton Public Schools* project. The purpose of this project is to build the capacity of Early Learning staff and leaders at the KEA and Edmonton Public Schools (EPSB) through co-creating and facilitating professional learning opportunities, classroom visitations and resource development to achieve the following four goals:

1. Support the growth and success of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children.
2. For staff to create and maintain strong relationships with children, their families and communities.
3. Engage parents and families to support their children's learning within the home.
4. For staff to develop and implement cultural understanding and respectfulness of the Cree worldview through Cree language development, literacy approaches and cultural experiences.

Implicit and explicit to the project is the ongoing development and strengthening of the relationship between KEA and EPSB and the shared understanding that when we learn from and with each other we will be more successful in our work with Indigenous families. As members of the cohort exchange knowledge and learn together, they will heighten their ability to successfully engage with families in improving educational experiences for their children. It is anticipated that project participants will both increase their knowledge about research-based early cognitive development, such as executive functioning, and increase their knowledge about Cree worldview culture and language, child rearing practices and traditions to assist in creating a culturally reflective learning environment. Throughout the project, a balance between the western and the traditional Cree approaches to support children's success is being sought.

## YEAR ONE

In 2018-2019 the focus of year one of the project was in three key areas:

- Building relationships between Enoch Cree language advisors, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, project staff and members of the cohort from the two jurisdictions.
- Engaging members of the cohort in shared professional learning that focused on research-informed practices such as: oral language; vocabulary development; phonological awareness; exploring traditional Cree child rearing practices; play-based learning; reciprocal teaching strategies for whole class instruction, including the use of the sharing circle and land-based learning.
- Creating a professional learning model that melds traditional Cree teaching with early childhood research and pedagogical practices through:
  - Sharing early learning approaches between KEA and EPSB staff.
  - Using literacy-based activities in both English and Cree (where capacity around Cree language instruction supports this).
  - Using culturally informed activities.

### KEA Cohort

- 20 staff and teachers working in:
  - KEA daycare
  - Headstart
  - Kindergarten program
- 2 KEA District leadership staff

To date, the cohort has participated in four professional learning days. The first two days were focused around traditional child-rearing practices and how to create a culturally inspired, child-centered classroom. The third and fourth days examined executive functioning - with an introduction to play-based learning that supports executive functioning and land-based education. Two of the cohort days were held at Enoch Cree Nation, one at the District's Woodcroft Languages Centre, and one in Parkland School Division's Nature Kindergarten.

In 2018-2019, progress was monitored using a variety of means including feedback surveys for each professional learning day, sharing of self-reflection by cohort participants and interviews with facilitators and participants. This feedback and monitoring of the project is supported by two District Research Consultants. Focus groups with community and family partners are also planned as part of the future feedback from the project.

Highlights from year one include:

- Participants valued the opportunity to visit Parkland's Nature Kindergarten as part of their professional learning, with some participants returning with their students.
- Several participants indicated the value of the professional relationships they were forming beyond their own jurisdiction. Some of these relationships have extended beyond the work of the project.

### EPSB Cohort

- 11 Pre-Kindergarten teachers
- 11 Kindergarten teachers
- 2 Inclusive Learning Early Years teacher consultants
- 1 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit consultant
- 1 Curriculum and Resource Support consultant

### Participants Feedback

*I think the last field trip we did to Nature Kindergarten really opened everyone's eyes to what can happen.*

*Our kids are going to benefit from this partnership.*

## YEARS TWO AND THREE

Year two of the project will focus on continued exploration of traditional Cree child-rearing practices, play-based learning and implementation of the professional learning model within the cohort programs, including site-based visitations to strengthen practices. It is anticipated that this sustained exchange of knowledge will continue to build skills in the cohort to meaningfully engage with families in support of their child's learning. Year three will continue the work of the previous year with an additional focus on the development of teaching and learning resources to be used and shared across both Districts; and an intentional and explicit focus on family engagement building on the work of the previous two years.

*The Exploring Early Learning & Family Engagement: A Professional Learning Partnership between Enoch Cree Nation and Edmonton Public Schools* is a model of a research-based collective capacity-building partnership that is producing high quality programming through engagement with educators, parents and the community. Through the three years of the grant, the professional learning cohort model will continue to be customized in response to the various data that is collected and the needs of the children and families served.

The *Exploring Early Learning & Family Engagement* project is one example of the District's efforts in support of the OECD's priority area, "*high quality early learning, through working with families and the provision of tailored early childhood education*"; there are several other District initiatives in place through the District's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education team to support our youngest learners, their families and the staff who work with them. These include:

- Elders and Knowledge Keepers were invited to share cultural teachings in classrooms.
- The First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Early Years Guide was launched on Connect in December 2018.
- The First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education unit provided the following early years professional learning sessions:
  - *Exploring Indigenous Lullabies and Traditional Parenting Practices to enhance teaching and learning in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten Classrooms* (22 participants).
  - *Berry Teachings and Cree Syllabics* (21 participants).
  - *Weaving Métis language and culture into Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten classrooms* (20 participants).
- The Early Learning Edukits were accessed by early learning classrooms across the District. Twenty-two schools signed the kits out for a period of one month each.
- Two videos: *Hello song* (morning greetings in Cree) and *Cree syllabic song* (phonological awareness of Cree language) were created as classroom resources to support Cree language learning.

## ADDITIONAL EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMMING

As outlined earlier in this report, research demonstrates the long-term benefits of investing in high quality early childhood programming; high quality, tailored and responsive early childhood education can result in better outcomes later in life. The following is an overview of the programs and initiatives undertaken at the District level in support of high quality early learning.

### Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, and Full-day Kindergarten

Edmonton Public Schools offers families three Early Years programs: Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten and Full-day Kindergarten. These programs help support more children to reach emotional, social, and intellectual and physical developmental milestones before they enter Grade 1.

#### PRE-KINDERGARTEN

Pre-Kindergarten programming is funded through Alberta Education for children aged two years and eight months to five years of age who meet provincial eligibility criteria: the child must have a first language other than English; have mild, moderate or severe developmental delays; or self-identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. Pre-Kindergarten programming is offered at select locations across the District, and follows the hub and satellite model outlined in the April 10, 2018, strategic plan update report [An Excellent Start to Learning](#).

#### 2018-2019 Early Years Registration

- 1,536 children in Pre-Kindergarten
- Approximately 6,711 children in Kindergarten
- Approximately 910 children in Full Day Kindergarten

## KINDERGARTEN

All children are eligible to begin attending Kindergarten at the age of four years and six months for the 2019-2020 school year; however, participation is a matter of parental choice, as Kindergarten is not a provincially mandated program. All of the District's 167 elementary programs offer Kindergarten programming, of which 141 are half-day programs.

## FULL DAY KINDERGARTEN

Through District efforts and in collaboration with the Edmonton Public Schools' Foundation, Full-day Kindergarten programming continues to be offered in 26 District schools. This is accomplished through the commitment of the Board of Trustees, who designate targeted funding to support 20 Full-day Kindergarten programs in the District, as well as the efforts of the Edmonton Public Schools' Foundation and the generosity of its donors, which support an additional six schools. Full-day Kindergarten programs are placed strategically in schools in some of the most socially complex communities served by the District.

## EARLY INTERVENTIONS

### SCREENING

Spring screening events are an important means to engage with families and identify earlier those children who would meet criteria for Pre-Kindergarten programming.

In 2018-2019, online screening registration was introduced along with a Pre-Kindergarten email and a dedicated phone line, which made communication with families easier and reduced work load for school office staff.

The District's partnership with the Multicultural Health Brokers (MHBs) continued to provide families who are English language learners with support for screening events, follow up assessments and registration in Pre-Kindergarten programs.

### 2018-2019 Screening

- Approximately 43 screening sessions held across the District
- Approximately 700 children evaluated
- MHBs offered support to approximately 326 families
- Most requested languages/cultural supports:
  - Arabic
  - Hindi
  - Punjabi
  - Somali
  - Tagalog

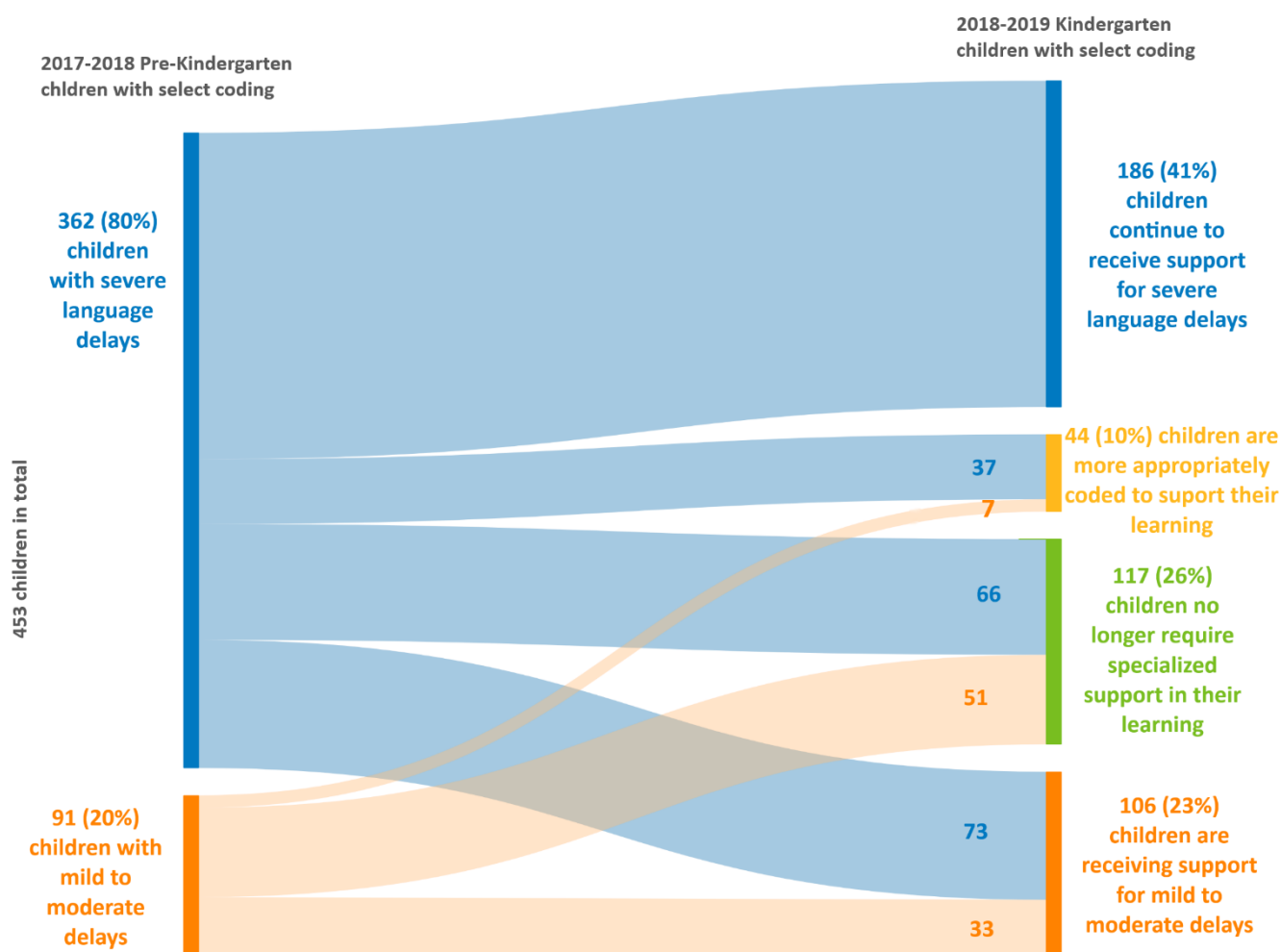




## PRE-KINDERGARTEN

Engagement with a Pre-Kindergarten program supports both the development of language skills and the social and emotional growth and well-being of children. A review of children in Pre-Kindergarten for the 2017-2018 school year who transitioned into Kindergarten for 2018-2019 demonstrates the positive impact of a quality early learning experience. The following chart shows a summary of 453 Pre-Kindergarten children with either a mild to moderate coding or a severe language delay coding and the positive impact of their Pre-Kindergarten learning experience. The chart illustrates children's growth relative to changes in their coding. Of the 453 children, 117 no longer required a learning code; 73 children went from severe to mild/moderate and 44 received further assessment and were more appropriately coded to reflect their learning needs.

Fig. 1. **Benefits of participating in Pre-Kindergarten for children with severe language or mild to moderate delays**

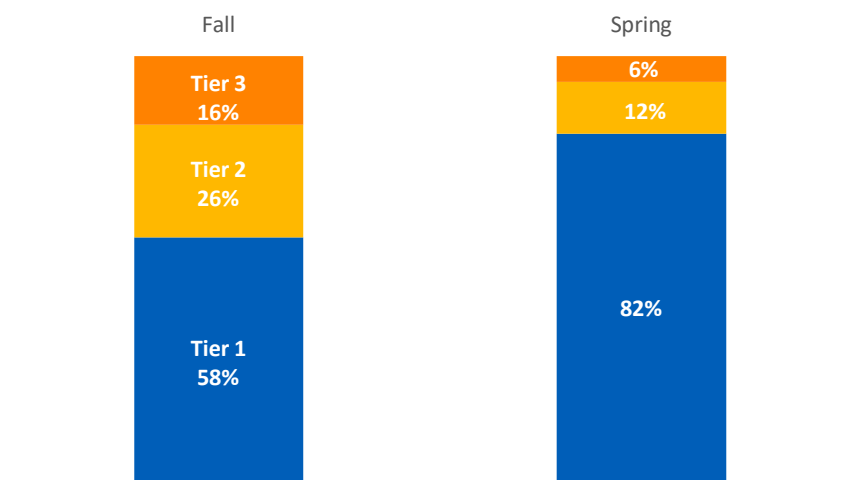


## EARLY YEARS EVALUATION-TEACHER ASSESSMENT (EYE-TA)

The EYE-TA is a screening tool used by all District Kindergarten teachers to monitor and assess every child's developmental readiness at the beginning of the school year and again in the spring. Kindergarten teachers gather information through observation and play-based activities to assess each child's developmental readiness across five domains: awareness of self and environment, social skills and approaches to learning, cognitive skills, language and communication, fine motor and gross motor physical development. Using the results of the EYE-TA, teachers are able to strategically program for the developmental and learning needs of children in their class.



Fig. 2. EYE-TA: Growth in readiness for Grade 1, 2018-2019



Growth in overall readiness of children for Grade 1 has remained very consistent over the past five years, with 81-82 per cent of children being ready for Kindergarten according to the spring EYE-TA assessments. The evidence of growth, as measured on the EYE-TA, from fall to spring of 2018-2019, reinforces the positive impact of Tier 2 and 3 interventions with our Kindergarten learners. For a multi-year summary of District EYE-TA data see Appendix I.

### LANGUAGE AND LITERACY PROJECT 2015-2019

This project was developed to support children entering Grade 1 who were identified through the EYE-TA results as being at-risk in their literacy development and/or who were identified through Program Unit Funding (PUF) screenings as having speech, language or communication needs. Over the course of the project's four years, more than 140 teachers and consultants have participated in this work. Participants engaged in a series of professional learning events focused on oral language, phonological awareness, vocabulary and reciprocal teaching. The following are examples of the project's impact on early literacy learning:

- Teacher participants reported a shift in their teaching practice, as they have increasingly embedded strategies that support the key areas of phonological awareness, vocabulary and oral language through-out all aspects of their teaching practice.
- A series of videos which showcase teachers from the project incorporating evidence-based strategies in their own classrooms is available to continue to help teachers build strong literacy strategies into their classroom practice.
- As a result of being a part of the project, a community of practice has been established for teachers to continue to share and reinforce their learnings from the Language and Literacy project.

### INCLUSIVE LEARNING SUPPORTS

Inclusive Learning teams work to identify and support children who require additional services, as well as provide classroom consultation support for teachers. These multidisciplinary teams may include, but are not limited to: Speech Language Pathologists; Occupational Therapists; Early Years teacher consultants; Psychologists; Physical Therapists; school family liaisons; and Educational, Speech Language, and Occupational Therapy Assistants. Educational Assistants (EAs) are placed in classrooms where children with complex needs require targeted or specialized support.

Using the data from the EYE-TA, schools work with their Inclusive Learning supervisor to determine how best to leverage the interventions and supports available through this multi-disciplinary team in support of our youngest learners. In 2018-2019, this collaboration resulted in 171 EAs being placed in Kindergarten classrooms to support children requiring Tier 3 interventions.

## INITIATIVES THAT SUPPORT FAMILIES

### WELCOME TO KINDERGARTEN WITH THE LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

[Welcome to Kindergarten](#) is a program developed by [The Learning Partnership](#) to help parents understand their child's academic and social development before starting school. Kindergarten teachers provide information sessions to parents prior to the start of the school year, where they share strategies and resources that show how

parents can support their child's development, with an emphasis on play-based learning. This program is available, through The Learning Partnership, to elementary schools across the District; Kindergarten teachers have access to a set of PowerPoint modules to support them in the delivery of information sessions with families.

### **FAMILY ORIENTED PROGRAMMING (FOP)**

Family oriented programming is for children with severe special needs, in receipt of PUF funding, in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten to help them connect what they are learning at school with life outside the classroom.

- FOP is offered in individual and group sessions and facilitated by members of a District multidisciplinary team. FOP topics are specific to the strategies outlined in a child's Individual Program Plan (IPP) and may include:
  - Family supports and strategies
  - Language and communication
  - Early literacy
  - Physical development
  - Social skills
  - Family field trips
- For 2018-2019, there were 11 Pre-Kindergarten FOP sessions offered for families and 10 sessions for Kindergarten families.

### **CAPACITY BUILDING IN HIGH QUALITY EARLY LEARNING**

A critical component of quality early learning programming is staff capacity building. The following are examples of targeted professional learning in support of early years programming:

- In the spring, a group of nine pre-service Pre-Kindergarten teachers received training in Nonviolent Crisis Intervention, writing IPPs, working with a multidisciplinary team and educational assistants and designing a developmentally appropriate, play-based environment for young children.
- Early Learning Summer Institutes offered in 2018 in partnership with MacEwan University and the Intercultural Child and Family Centre, included: *Creating Supportive Learning Spaces for Building Cultural Identity in the Early Years* and *Inquiry and Play in Your Early Years Program*. Thirty-five Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers attended these sessions.
- Hanen's *Learning Language and Loving It (LLLI)* training was available to Educational Assistants working in Kindergarten and Pre-Kindergarten programs. Once trained, EAs are able to work with individual children or small groups to facilitate language development. To date, 113 EAs have been trained in LLLI.

### **NEXT STEPS**

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- *wahkotowin: Exploring Early Learning & Family Engagement* year two will include:
  - Professional learning session focused on oral storytelling, Cree language, 12 Types of Play and exploring Indigenous lullabies and traditional parenting practices.
  - Inter-visitations between EPSB and KEA participants.
  - A visit to the Niitsitapi Learning Centre.
- The Pre-Kindergarten First Nations, Métis, and Inuit consultant will participate in the Pre-Kindergarten cohort meetings to help build teacher capacity around foundational knowledge and share teaching and learning resources.
- Continue to support high quality programming and early intervention strategies in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten.
- Continue to review Pre-Kindergarten program locations relevant to where children live, and to explore programming spaces with community partners
- Continue to engage with families to increase awareness of and participation in screening events and Pre-Kindergarten programs for eligible children; and continue to provide high quality family oriented programming sessions to support families of children accessing PUF.

## REFERENCES

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# APPENDIX I

## MULTI-YEAR SUMMARY OF DISTRICT EYE-TA DATA

Early Years Evaluation – Teacher Assessment and District Indicators	Results (in percentages)									
	2014-15		2015-16		2016-17		2017-18		2018-19	
	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
	Improvement		Improvement		Improvement		Improvement		Improvement	
Early Year Evaluation – Teacher Assessment Percentage of children entering (Fall) and leaving (Spring) EPSB programs that meet developmental milestones	62	81	61	81	62	82	59	81	58	81
	+19		+20		+20		+22		+23	
Awareness of Self and Environment	80	92	80	92	80	92	80	92	79	92
	+12		+12		+12		+12		+13	
Social Skills and Approaches to Learning	75	89	77	89	77	89	76	89	76	89
	+14		+12		+12		+13		+13	
Cognitive Skills	64	90	62	89	62	89	60	88	60	88
	+34		+27		+27		+28		+28	
Language and Communication	75	88	75	88	76	89	75	89	74	89
	+13		+13		+13		+14		+15	
Physical Development										
Fine Motor	70	93	70	92	69	92	69	92	68	92
	+23		+22		+22		+23		+24	
Gross Motor	77	93	76	92	79	93	79	93	76	93
	+16		+16		+14		+14		+17	