

DATE: April 13, 2021

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Trustee Shelagh Dunn

SUBJECT: Motion re Action Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Skills

REFERENCE: [Trustees' Handbook – Section 5.2.2 – Notices of Motion](#)

ISSUE

In 2018, the Board of Trustees for Edmonton Public Schools reaffirmed the [Strategic Plan](#), which serves as a foundation for the Division's decision-making, accountability and assurance. Priority 1, Goal 2 of this plan, "Success for Every Student" articulates the outcome that "more students demonstrate growth and achieve student learning outcomes with a specific focus on literacy and numeracy." However, the [Strategic Plan Update Report: Literacy and Numeracy](#) presented at the March 23, 2021 Board meeting highlighted significant areas of concern in both literacy and numeracy.

Notice of motion was served at the March 23, 2021, Board meeting.

BACKGROUND

The recent Strategic Plan Update report provided more comprehensive information to the board on historical literacy and numeracy achievement. The data highlighted some decreases in student literacy and numeracy achievement on some historical measures, including local and provincial assessments, and there appeared to be a lack of evidence that more students were demonstrating growth and achieving student learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy.

The report also included summaries of data when social vulnerability information was accounted for at a school level. This report defined high social vulnerability using the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) based on student mobility, family income and lone parent status, and categorized schools into four groupings based upon a ranking of SVI. Of particular note were the historical results of the Grade 6 and 9 Provincial Achievement Tests which were split into four SVI groupings. These graphs showed disparity between SVI groupings, but they also showed achievement gaps within SVI grouping, particularly for students who meet coding requirements for specialized supports and First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in the first three SVI groupings.

Given the historical data combined with the potential impacts of the current pandemic on student learning, Edmonton Public Schools requires a Division-wide action plan to address literacy and numeracy skills. I have no doubt that every teacher and staff member in the Division is committed to the goal of improved literacy and numeracy skills for students, that teachers and principals know their students and are addressing the needs of their schools daily. The question to be addressed with a Division-wide action plan is how Edmonton Public Schools can best address these needs with resources and supports for schools. From the recent data, it is clear that these resources and supports need to have an evidence-based focus and need to take into account any barriers which widen the achievement gap for some students.

Evidence-based planning

The current [Funding Manual for School Authorities](#) outlines the importance of continuous improvement for school authority accountability and assurance. Of particular note, Divisions are tasked with “implementing research and practice-informed strategies to maintain or improve performance within and across domains and focused on student growth and achievement.”

The need for evidence-based practice is also important because of the varied impact of the pandemic on student learning. For example, recent research from the University of Alberta suggests that the pandemic has impacted literacy skills for struggling readers in the early grades. It will be important for a plan to address literacy skills impacted by the pandemic to include evidence-based practices such as explicit and systematic instruction and targeted intervention for struggling readers.

Evidence-based practices are also important due to the prevalence of learning disabilities in the student population. In 2018, our Board reviewed a [report on learning disabilities](#) which highlighted that at that time, approximated 3.7 per cent of students at Edmonton Public Schools had been identified as having a learning disability, when a conservative estimate of the prevalence of learning disabilities is 10 per cent. This means that thousands of students are likely struggling with an undiagnosed reading, writing or mathematical learning disability and it is very important to be providing universal, targeted and individualized supports with research evidence that these supports are proven to work for students with learning disabilities.

Equity-focused planning

Upon review of the most recent Strategic Update Plan report, it is clear that results are not the same for all student demographics. One of Edmonton Public School’s four cornerstone values is equity, and there is a Division-wide commitment to improving the equity of systems and structures as well as resources and supports so that every student is successful. While we do not currently have information on every demographic, the update report shows an achievement gap for students in schools high in social vulnerability indices, students who meet coding requirements for specialized supports, and students who self-identified as First Nations, Métis and Inuit. Any plan to improve literacy results needs to take into account barriers for success experienced by these identified groups and/or privilege provided to students who are not in these identified groups. It is important that any action plan use evidence-based practices specific to equity-seeking groups which are informed by the stated experiences of students and families belonging to these groups.

Our Board has committed to the thoughtful collection of race-based data, and part of this commitment includes the use of data to create positive, equitable change, including a focus on identifying systemic racism. We currently have data for self-identified First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, and it is important to use this data to create equity for students.

It is my hope that an action plan to improve literacy and numeracy skills includes data on what has been working well. For instance, it may be possible to learn from any schools with high social vulnerability rankings where scores are above the Division average. I know this collaborative work is currently ongoing and supported by the cornerstone value of collaboration. I believe in the hard work happening in Edmonton Public Schools and hope that an action plan will offer support to schools in choosing practices and resources that have been shown to be effective through research, practice and engagement.

RELATED FACTS

- The Strategic Plan Update Report: Literacy and Numeracy presented to Board on March 23, 2021, provided data which did not show broad-based growth or improvement in literacy and numeracy skills, and which show significant achievement gaps for some groups of students in the Division.
- An action plan to improve literacy and numeracy skills should be evidence-based and should include a focus on equity for students facing systemic barriers to success.

CONSIDERATIONS AND ANALYSIS

I believe that the goal of improved literacy and numeracy skills is shared by all in the Division, and I know that plans for continuous improvement are in place at the school and central level. It may require additional staff time to develop a Division-level action plan to improve literacy and numeracy skills of students for the quickly-approaching school year ahead. However, given declining achievement on some indicators, large achievement gaps, and the potential impact of the pandemic on literacy and numeracy, it is more important than ever for these plans to be Division-wide, public, and accountable to the Board of Trustees.

RECOMMENDATION

That Administration develop an action plan to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of students for the start of the 2021-2022 school year, with a focus on evidence-based practice, equity for students in the highest social vulnerability indexed schools, students who meet coding requirements for specialized supports and First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

OPTIONS

1. Approve the recommendation.
2. Provide feedback and request changes to the recommendation for approval.

NEXT STEPS

Upon approval of this recommendation, Administration will develop an evidence-based plan to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of students for the start of the 2021-2022 school year and bring it back to the Board.

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