

DATE: April 10, 2018

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Strategic Plan Update: Priority 1 Goal One: An Excellent Start to Learning

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ISSUE

The purpose of this Strategic Plan Update report is to provide the Board of Trustees with an overview of efforts being taken in support of Priority 1, Goal One: An Excellent Start to Learning with the outcome of more children entering Grade 1 reaching emotional, social, intellectual and physical developmental milestones.

BACKGROUND

In 2014, Edmonton Public Schools formally launched its District Strategic Plan for the 2014–2018 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 reflects the work of schools and central services in support of high quality early childhood programming and the success of our youngest learners and is in direct response to Priority 1 Goal One of the 2014-2018 District Strategic Plan.

KEY POINTS

Strategic Plan Update reports, introduced in 2016–2017, provide an extension of the AERR.

The attached report is focused on the District's work in support of high quality Early Years programming to help more children reach developmental milestones to be ready for Grade 1.

ATTACHMENTS and APPENDICES

ATTACHMENT I Strategic Plan Update: Priority 1 Goal One: An Excellent Start to Learning

NP:mh

Strategic Plan Update:

Priority 1 Goal One: An Excellent
Start to Learning

April 10, 2018

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INTRODUCTION

The Early Years Strategic Plan Update report provides the Board of Trustees with an overview of work being taken to help more children experience success as they enter Grade 1 and beyond. These efforts reflect the work of schools, multiple central units and key community partners whose expertise and mandate support early years services and programming.

This report focuses on data, research and evidence-based initiatives in direct support of high quality early years programming. The District's work in the area of the early years have been informed by research and the findings from the early years pilot, reflect the collaboration between schools and central staff and strive to be responsive to a growing and increasingly complex preschool population in the city of Edmonton. The report highlights the following areas:

- importance of the early years
- learning through play
- District Early Years Programs with a focus on the Pre-Kindergarten model
- Early Years Evaluation-Teacher Assessment (EYE-TA) data
- the work of Inclusive Learning
- an overview of various early years initiatives that inform quality early years programming

The report concludes with highlights of additional opportunities or initiatives occurring in the District that promote quality early years programming. By broadening and deepening the work in the early years to include a focus on positive mental health, family engagement, high quality teaching and leadership, and school, central and community collaboration, our District will continue to strengthen support for our youngest learners, including those children who benefit most from early intervention.



IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY YEARS

Research in the field of early childhood provides compelling evidence that the early years are an important time in children's lives to build a supportive foundation for future skill development, well-being and lifelong learning. These studies demonstrate that there are long term benefits of investing in high quality early childhood programs which positively impact outcomes for children, family and society. Meta-analyses of a multitude of studies in early childhood (Alexander & Ignjatovic; 2012; Center on the Developing Child, 2009; OECD, 2017) show that attending a high quality early childhood program is a strong predictor of:

- improved social, emotional, cognitive, numeracy and language development
- improved physical and mental health outcomes throughout life including reduction in smoking, alcohol and drug use, crime and welfare
- reduced dropout rates, on time graduation and higher post-secondary attendance
- better preparation and transition into Kindergarten and Grade 1 with fewer children accessing special education funding or requiring specialized programming later on
- poverty reduction, increased equity in children's learning outcomes and increased social mobility from generation to generation

The evidence is clear: early childhood matters a great deal and high quality early childhood education can result in better outcomes later in life. The research also clearly articulates what characteristics of a program constitute high quality early childhood programming that result in improved outcomes for children (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). These are:

- warm and responsive adult-child interactions
- learning through play and inquiry
- safe physical setting
- language-rich environment
- qualified staff
- small group/class sizes and high adult-child ratios
- effective interventions to address specific developmental challenges
- developmentally appropriate "curriculum"

From 2014-2015 to the present school year, Early Years programming in Edmonton Public Schools has evolved in response to what current research tells us about high quality programming and is expanding to meet the demand of a growing population of families with young children. These deliberate efforts of the past four years support the District's Strategic Plan - Priority 1, Goal One: *An excellent start to learning*. This work is comprised of three early childhood programs: Pre-Kindergarten, Full-day Kindergarten and Kindergarten. While Early Childhood Services programs are not mandatory in Alberta, increasing access across District schools to these Early Years program offerings enables more families to choose Edmonton Public Schools for their young children to help them get a great start to learning in preparation for entering Grade 1.

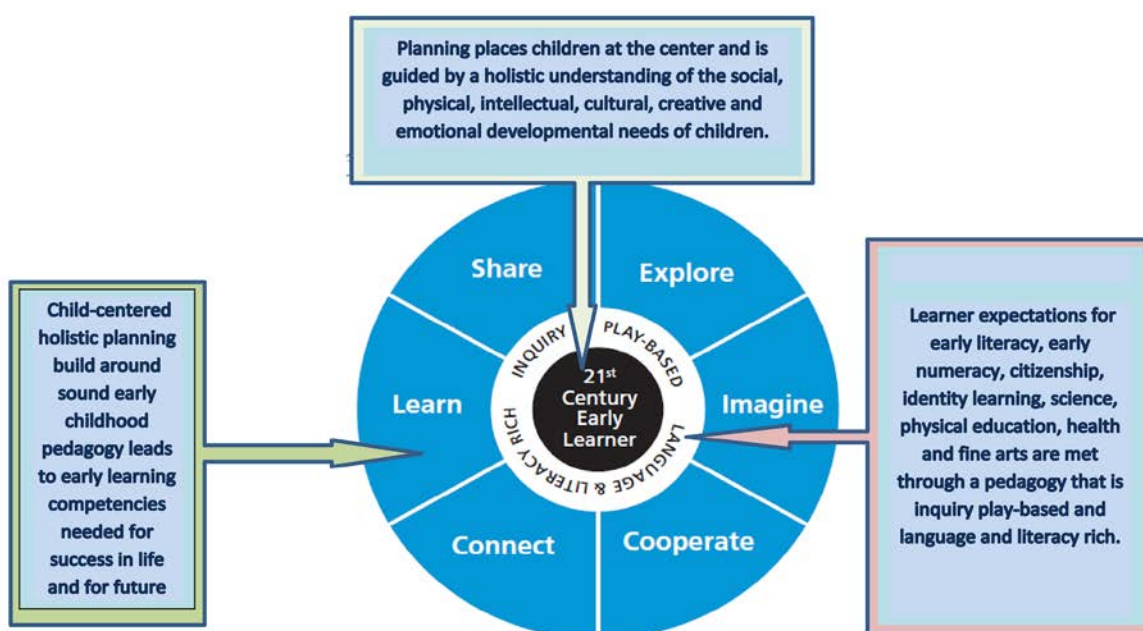
LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

The foundation for high quality early childhood programming in the Province of Alberta is purposeful play-based learning and developmentally appropriate practices. In classrooms across the District, Early Years programming in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten looks different than formal school and embraces a play-based approach to learning as part of a high quality Early Years program to best meet the needs of young children and help them develop a wide range of abilities and competencies to succeed in school. Programming for Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten is supported through research and evidence informed curricular outcomes, guiding principles, core beliefs and philosophical approaches outlined in the following key documents: [Alberta Education Kindergarten Program Statement](#), [Edmonton Public Schools Early Years Guiding Document](#), [Alberta Education](#)

The District is committed to helping teachers, leaders, staff and parents build an understanding of developmentally appropriate inquiry and play-based practices in a language and literacy rich environment. Learning through play is supported by decades of research by early years experts which concludes that for young children, play and academic work are not distinct, and children learn best by doing. Research on early child development is clear: when children are playing, children are learning (CMEC, 2010). The scientific community acknowledges the benefits of play to strengthen neural pathways for improved development in thinking skills, problem solving, self-regulation and language expression. Research demonstrates that learning through play leads to greater social, emotional and academic success later on and that readiness for school means much more than a child's academic competence or knowing letters and numbers. Many children start school but are not ready to learn because they lack the critical ability to regulate social, emotional and cognitive behaviours, known as executive function. Executive function is developed through opportunities to engage in meaningful play experiences and problem solving and is the foundation upon which later academic concepts can be successfully learned. It is important that staff working with young children understand the impact of play-based learning and what they need to do to foster meaningful and engaged play with children.

Early childhood educators embrace philosophical and theoretical approaches to learning through play such as the Reggio Emilia approach, the Project Approach, socio-cultural theories or theories of knowing and learning that follow a developmental progression. Educators working with young children should see children as capable, strong and filled with potential. Fundamental to the success of an early learning classroom is a rich and inviting physical learning environment combined with strong and loving relationships between the children and the teacher and robust learning opportunities. Educators who ask questions, foster wonder, creativity and curiosity and use literature to deepen experiences, are building strong language and thinking skills through inquiry. Below is a competency graphic from the Early Years Guiding document to guide the design of high quality Early Years programs.

Understanding the Early Years Competency Graphic to Help Guide Your Program Design



High quality early childhood programming is synonymous with inquiry play-based learning in a language rich environment and is the approach to learning the District subscribes to for Early Years programs. In the next section, each of the three Early Years programs will be highlighted, beginning with Pre-Kindergarten.

EARLY YEARS PROGRAMS

Edmonton Public Schools offers families three Early Years programs: Pre-Kindergarten, Full-day Kindergarten and Kindergarten. These programs help support more children to reach emotional, social, intellectual and physical developmental milestones before they enter Grade 1. As the population of our city increases and evolves, so does the population of young families and the number of children who would benefit from the opportunity to attend an early years program. To better understand the impact of the city's changing population in relationship to the District's early years programming, it is important to review demographic information within the city of Edmonton.

The City of Edmonton census data shows that the population of children ages 0-4 has remained fairly consistent from 2014 to 2016 with over 40,000 children under five years of age. Though the number of children in Edmonton under the age of five has remained relatively static, young children in Edmonton represent an increasingly diverse population. Approximately 27 per cent of children in Edmonton are learning English as a new language. Many newcomer families have experienced trauma, have had limited or inconsistent access to schools and may live under the limitations of poverty. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples are also a growing population and represent five per cent of the overall population in Edmonton or approximately 46,600 people and many with young families. In addition, there are an increasing number of children with complex developmental needs ranging from autism to speech and language delays who benefit from access to early intervention services through health and education.

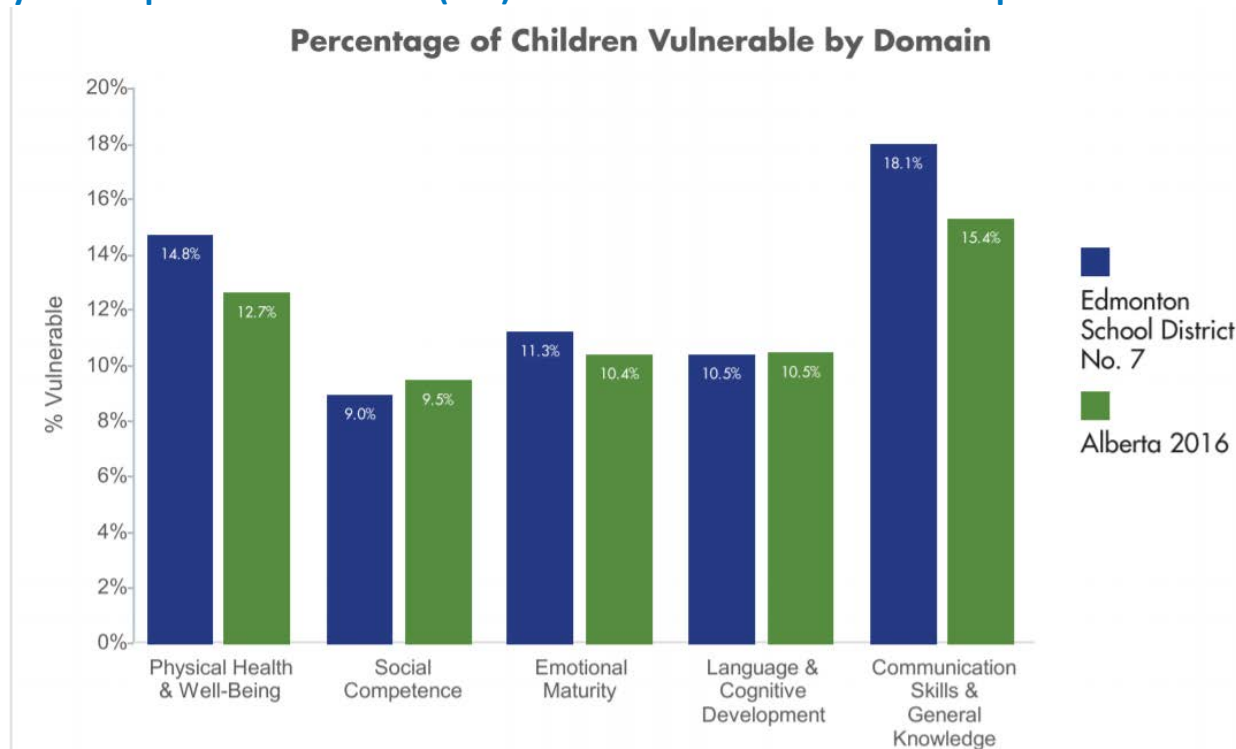
Another source of data to help describe the city's population through the perspective of children aged 0-4 comes from the Early Development Instrument (EDI). The EDI is a short questionnaire completed by Kindergarten teachers across the province. The EDI questionnaire measures children's ability to meet age appropriate developmental expectations across five areas:

- physical Health and Well-Being
- social Competence
- emotional Maturity
- language and cognitive development
- communication skills and general knowledge

Data from the EDI is used as an overall population measure and is collected every three to five years by the Alberta Government to provide a provincial and municipal census of child development. This data allows communities to understand trends in child development that can help shape decision-making, planning, programs and policy for the developmental health of children ages 0-5. EDI data was last gathered in February 2016 and results have recently been shared with schools, school districts and community partners. Information from the EDI is used, along with other data, to assist our District with decisions for expansion and distribution of Early Years programs.

The following chart provides an overview of how children in Edmonton scored on the most recent EDI compared to the provincial average. Overall, the District serves a higher percentage of vulnerable children than the provincial average. Vulnerable describes children who score below the 10th percentile cut-off for the normative population. High vulnerability within a population indicates a greater percentage of children not meeting developmental norms when they come to Kindergarten. Research confirms that overall, these children benefit significantly throughout their lives when they participate in quality early years programming.

Early Development Instrument (EDI): EPSB and Provincial Data Comparison



In efforts to be responsive to the demographic make-up of 0-4 year olds in Edmonton, the District has engaged in an evolution of how to deliver early childhood services programming prior to Kindergarten to enable access for more eligible children. The Pre-Kindergarten Program model continues to include children with severe developmental delays while increasing access for more children who are First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, children who are English Language Learners and children with mild or moderate developmental delays. The former Early Education programs and Early Learning classes have been blended into what is now known as Pre-Kindergarten. For 2017-2018, District Pre-Kindergarten programs have been expanded to 31 schools across the city to address the demand for programming support for funded children as outlined by Alberta Education coding and funding criteria. Eligibility for Alberta Education Pre-Kindergarten funding includes the following:

- Program Unit Funding (PUF) for children with severe disabilities or delays
- Mild-Moderate Funding (MM) for children with mild or moderate disabilities or delays
- English as a Second Language (ESL) for children who are English Language Learners (ELL)
- First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) funding for children whose families self-identify and who would benefit from a language enhanced program

PRE-KINDERGARTEN, KINDERGARTEN and FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN

Pre-Kindergarten

Approximately 1,536 children currently attend a District Pre-Kindergarten program.

Pre-Kindergarten is an early intervention program for children aged 2 years and 8 months to 5 years of age and is designed to build children's strengths and skills in a playful, language-rich environment. Children attend half-day classes four days per week, from Tuesday to Friday. Class sizes range from 8-16 children and the children are taught by a certificated District teacher. Programming follows Alberta Education expectations as outlined in the *Early Years Guiding document*, the *Standards for the Provision of Early Childhood Special Education*, the *Play, Possibilities and Participation curriculum framework* and the *Kindergarten Program statement*.

Access to multidisciplinary supports including speech and language, physical or occupational therapy and school family liaison services help children work on skills such as communication, mobility and sensory exploration. To be eligible for Pre-Kindergarten, children must have a first language other than English; have mild, moderate or severe developmental delays; or self-identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. This is the first year of District-wide Pre-Kindergarten programs. The model for this program was created through an extensive two-year pilot project which began in 2014.

From Pilot to Program

To address the outcome of more children entering Grade 1 reaching developmental milestones, a pilot was conducted from 2014-2016 in four Millwoods schools to trial an expanded approach to Pre-Kindergarten programming. The purpose of the pilot was to develop a replicable model for a coordinated approach to programming, funding and access to serve children eligible for early intervention in communities closer to their home. The Early Years pilot successfully developed a program model that proved to be flexible, responsive and adaptable and could be replicated in other locations across the District. Following the conclusion of the pilot, the program model was approved by the Superintendent in 2016. This also included the adoption of a new program name, “Pre-Kindergarten” and the approval of a three-year plan supporting expansion and distribution of Pre-Kindergarten programming across the District.



Expansion and distribution of Pre-Kindergarten programs under the new model began in the south and west areas of the city in 2016-2017 and in the north for 2017-2018. In developing the expansion plan, new and existing locations for Pre-Kindergarten programs were based on the following criteria:

- population demographics and enrolment pressures
- consideration to maintain existing Early Education Special Education Designated program sites and schools with Early Learning classes where possible
- facility conditions and space utilization
- impact and lessons learned from the opening of 2016-2017 locations

The chart below shows the enrolment growth of Pre-Kindergarten programs as a result of the pilot and the ensuing expansion efforts, as well as the increase in access for children who qualify for Pre-Kindergarten programming under Alberta Education eligibility requirements for PUF, MM, ELL and FNMI funding.

Pre-Kindergarten Coding Chart

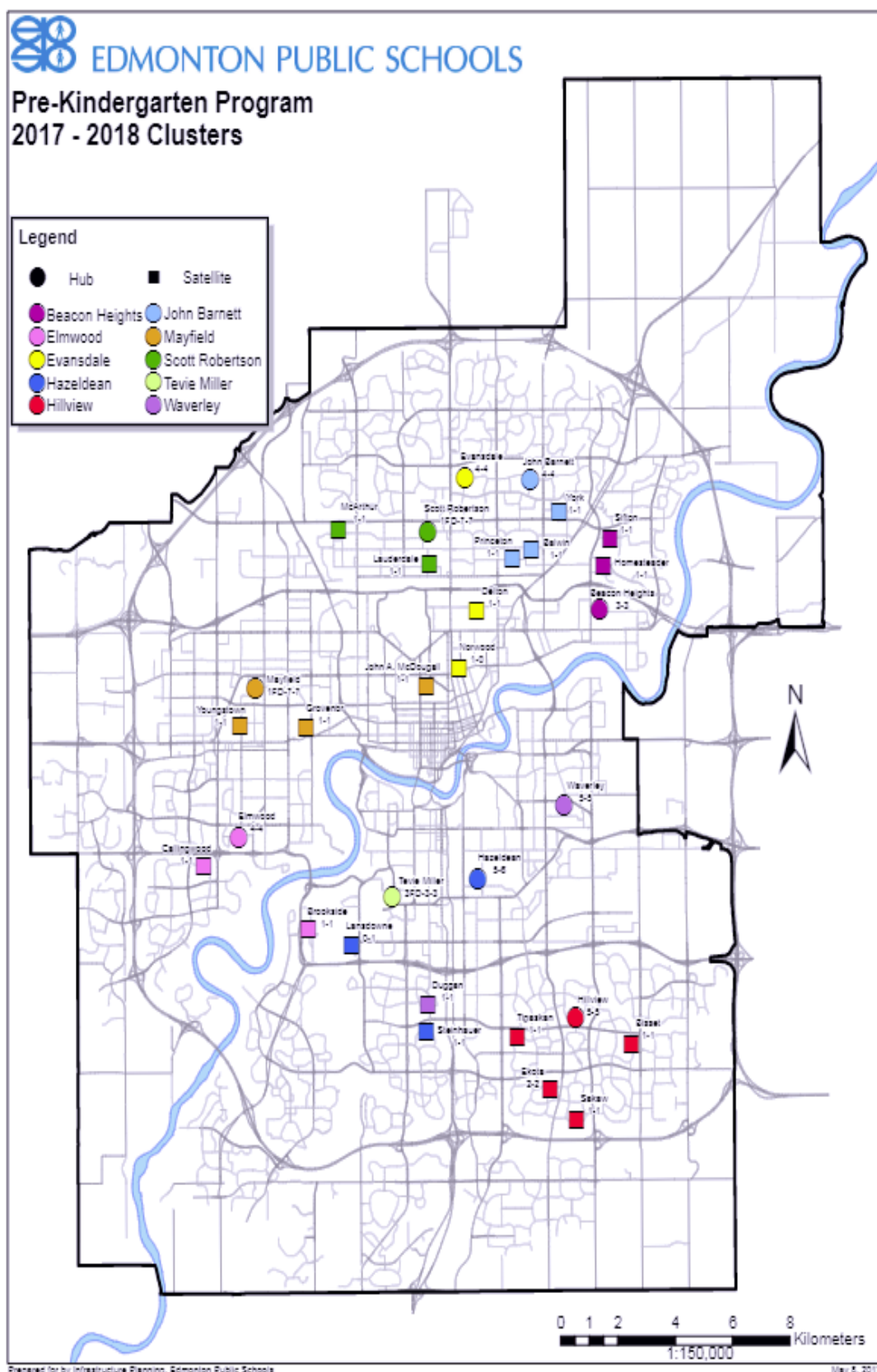
Code/ Year	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Pre-Kindergarten Program Enrolment: Total Number of Children	1052	1162	1292	1530
Number of Children Eligible for PUF	833	925	1020	1129
Number of Children Eligible for MM	34	50	78	121
Number of Children Identified as ELL	86	126	177	293
Number of Children Identified as FNMI	97	86	111	128

Note: Children coded ELL or FNMI may be counted twice if they also have a MM or PUF code. The data does not reflect children who have dual codes.



Pre-Kindergarten Locations and Program Cluster Model

The following map shows the location of the 31 District schools offering Pre-Kindergarten programming. The map is colour coded to show the ten Pre-Kindergarten clusters and distinguishes the Hub and Satellite schools within each cluster. Following the map is an overview of how the Cluster model operationalizes.



The District's Pre-Kindergarten program model is based on school clusters. Each cluster includes a larger Pre-Kindergarten Hub program partnering with smaller Satellite programs at neighbouring schools within the cluster. The Hub sites typically have eight classrooms with an a.m. and p.m. cohort in each class. Satellite sites typically have one classroom with an a.m. and p.m. cohort in the class.

Hub Schools	Satellite Schools
Beacon Heights	Homesteader and Sifton
Elmwood	Callingwood and Brookside
Evansdale	Delton and Norwood
Hazeldean	Lansdowne and Steinhauer
Hillview	Bisset, Ekota, Sakaw and Tipaskan
John Barnett	Balwin, Princeton and York
Mayfield	Grovenor, John A. McDougall and Youngstown
Scott Robertson	Lauderdale and McArthur
Tevie Miller	
Waverly	Duggen

The Hub programs function in accordance with Alberta Education designated Special Education ECS program requirements, have a minimum of 70 per cent of their children accessing PUF and operate class sizes ranging from 8 to 12 children. A typical Hub class would have eight children accessing PUF and two children who are coded as MM, ELL or FNMI. Hub programs retain and administer the PUF budget for all schools in their cluster and provide the exempt and support staff for children eligible for PUF and MM funding at both the Hub and Satellite sites.

Satellite sites have a maximum of 50 per cent of the children accessing PUF and operate class sizes around 16 children. Typically a Satellite classroom would include children who are eligible for ELL, FNMI and MM funding and six children accessing PUF. Satellite site schools provide the teacher for their Pre-Kindergarten classroom and work in collaboration with the Hub program around accessing their support and exempt staff, such as Educational Assistants, Speech Language Assistants, a Speech Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist and Physical Therapist.

At the heart of the evolution from pilot to District Pre-Kindergarten program is the extensive teamwork across Hubs and Satellites, among central staff and school staff and with key community partners such as Alberta Health Services and the Multicultural Health Brokers. Throughout the pilot and over multiple school years there have been countless meetings, training sessions and professional learning opportunities that have informed and contributed to the evolution of the model, sustainable systems change and ultimately the success of the expansion. This work truly reflects the District's Cornerstone Values of equity, integrity, accountability and most notably, collaboration.



Access to and Awareness of Pre-Kindergarten Programs for Families

Access to Kindergarten is determined by a child's age and this criterion is commonly known amongst families. However, access to Pre-Kindergarten programming is not as universally understood by families or the broader community. To access a Pre-Kindergarten program, children must meet requirements for funding as outlined by Alberta Education and there are two ways to determine this: provide a current assessment by a healthcare professional or attend a District screening session.

- **Access through HealthCare**

For some families, their child has been previously assessed or diagnosed by a healthcare professional for a developmental delay. The healthcare professional assists the family to submit assessment reports to Pre-Kindergarten sites for confirmation of eligibility and placement. Information sessions are provided in the spring at Hub locations for families with current assessment reports so they can meet with staff and find out more about the Pre-Kindergarten program. Children with assessments from healthcare professionals are typically those with severe disabilities or delays and are eligible for PUF.

- **Access through Screening**

Many other families are interested in a Pre-Kindergarten program and can attend a screening session to find out if their child meets criteria for the program. Screening sessions begin in March for the following school year. Each Pre-Kindergarten site hosts screening sessions which take approximately one hour and are conducted by Speech Language Pathologists and Occupational Therapists in collaboration with school staff and community partners to determine eligibility. Most screening sessions accommodate 23 children in a day. Supports for families requiring assistance to participate in the screening session are available as required (such as translators). Pre-Kindergarten sites can choose to add additional screening sessions if they have more spaces available for eligible children.

Family awareness about the opportunity for Pre-Kindergarten is important. The screening sessions and the District's working relationship with Alberta Health Services help to promote awareness. However, to support overall awareness, the District has developed a comprehensive communication plan to advertise Pre-Kindergarten screening and information sessions. This plan includes:

- District website information
- School Zone posting
- flyers and posters for schools, preschool agency events and other locations frequented by families
- messaging for outdoor school signs
- messaging for healthcare professionals and agencies working with young children
- social media posts on District channels
- paid advertising on Facebook
- radio advertisements targeting multicultural radio shows
- emails to community partners
- Superintendent's message in the Edmonton Examiner

The Pre-Kindergarten advertising campaign typically begins early January in preparation for March Screening and Information sessions. Data is being gathered to track the effectiveness of each of the advertising methods and inform future advertising campaigns.

The District also takes deliberate efforts to connect with families who may not typically be aware of programming supports for their younger children. These efforts include working closely with the Multicultural Health Brokers to reach out to families new to Canada and the District's Family Liaison Project focused on early engagement with Indigenous families.

Pre-Kindergarten Screenings

Universal screening tools and a process for screening were first developed during the pilot and are revised each year by therapists, school and central staff. Training for therapists, screening coordinators, school administrators and office staff is provided in January in preparation for the actual screening sessions, supporting parent inquiries and entering screening data to inform program placements. The first screening sessions took place in 2014-2015 and were hosted at Hillview, Tipaskan, Sakaw and Ekota schools. Since then, additional screening events have been added each year with the phased expansion and distribution of Pre-Kindergarten programs. Consistently, approximately 95 per cent of children who attend a screening session are eligible for a Pre-Kindergarten program. Families of children that are not eligible are provided with a variety of community resources such as Edmonton Public Library programs, community preschools or Parent Link Centres, and all families were welcomed to return to a District school for Kindergarten.

When looking at the data around the number of families that participated in a screening event in the spring and the Pre-Kindergarten program enrolment for the following school year, there appears to be a correlation between spring screening and the increase in Pre-Kindergarten enrolment. Since the start of the screening sessions in spring of 2015, the number of children accessing Pre-Kindergarten programming has grown by 47 per cent. The following chart provides an overview of the evolution and growth of District supported Pre-Kindergarten screening events as well as Pre-Kindergarten enrolment data from 2014-2015 to the present operational year.

School Year	Program Enrolment	Screening Data
2014 - 2015	1052	March 2015 (for 2015-16 school year) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Screening sessions at Hillview, Ekota, Tipaskan, Sakaw Approximately 195 children attended
2015 - 2016	1162	March 2016 (for 2016-17 school year) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18 Screening sessions at Hillview, Bisset, Ekota, Tipaskan, Sakaw, Hazeldean, Lansdowne, Steinhauer, Mayfield, John A McDougall, Grovenor, Youngstown, Elmwood, Callingwood Approximately 325 children attended
2016 - 2017	1292	March 2017 (for 2017-18 school year) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 34 Screening sessions at Hillview, Bisset, Ekota, Tipaskan, Sakaw, Hazeldean, Lansdowne, Steinhauer, Mayfield, Grovenor, Youngstown, John A McDougall, Elmwood, Callingwood, Brookside, Waverley, Scott Robertson, McArthur, Lauderdale, John Barnett, Homesteader, Norwood, Delton, Sifton, Beacon Heights, Princeton, York, Evansdale, Balwin Approximately 635 children attended
2017 - 2018	1530	March 2018 (for 2018-19 school year) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 34 Screening sessions at Hillview, Bisset, Ekota, Tipaskan, Sakaw, Hazeldean, Lansdowne, Steinhauer, Mayfield, Grovenor, Youngstown, John A McDougall, Elmwood, Callingwood, Brookside, Waverley, Scott Robertson, McArthur, Lauderdale, John Barnett, Homesteader, Norwood, Delton, Sifton, Beacon Heights, Princeton, Duggan, York, Evansdale, Balwin Screening recently concluded. Current data TBD.

NOTE: Tevie Miller Pre-Kindergarten program is not included in the screening data as they serve children with a primary diagnosis of severe language and/or speech delays

Centralized Supports for Pre-Kindergarten Model: Placement and Transportation

- **District Support Services (DSS)**

Once screening has been completed, a centralized placement process is in place which utilizes the Special Needs Assisted Placement (SNAP) tool and aligns with District SNAP timelines. The centralized placement process is coordinated through DSS and Student Transportation. The benefits of a systematic placement of children include:

- more children attending Pre-Kindergarten at their designated school
- reduced yellow bus ride time for children accessing PUF
- more families from communities whose children attend Pre-Kindergarten together
- balanced class profiles with a pre-determined ratio of PUF and MM, FNMI and ELL
- accurate count of children returning to Pre-Kindergarten for a second year

There are three waves of placement lists from April to June. DSS provides each group of Pre-Kindergarten cluster schools with a list of children to review. Administrators from each school cluster collaborate to determine site and classroom configurations and schools begin calling families to register for the upcoming school year. This process helps each Pre-Kindergarten cluster build balanced class profiles. DSS continues to support placement of children with assessment reports over the summer. This work fills the majority of any remaining spaces and most Pre-Kindergarten programs are at capacity by September 30th.

- **Student Transportation**

Transportation for Pre-Kindergarten is provided for those children who are eligible for Program Unit Funding (PUF). Funding for this service is accessed through a grant from Alberta Education that supports student transportation. While ridership for children accessing PUF has increased there are transportation efficiencies that have been realized through the new model. For example, in 2015 there were approximately 74 per cent of children being transported to a site in their home zone. Currently, there are 86 per cent of children being transported to a site in their home zone. There are far fewer children being transported out of zone for programming, as demonstrated by the following data:

Year	Pre-Kindergarten Programs	Pre-Kindergarten Children riding the Yellow Bus (PUF only)
2014-15	10 Early Education sites	761
2015-16	13 Pre-Kindergarten sites	796
2016-17	21 Pre-Kindergarten sites	923
2017-18	31 Pre-Kindergarten sites	1014

In addition, Transportation Service Areas for Pre-Kindergarten have been developed to enable more efficient routes and lower ride times. Working collaboratively with Pre-Kindergarten sites on aligning School Hours of Operation to maximize pick up and drop off times has also been an asset. In 2017-2018, the average one-way ride time for a child in Pre-Kindergarten was approximately 32 minutes. The average ride time for Satellite sites is 25 minutes. Having a community based approach to transportation means eligible children in a community can ride together. Because Hub sites have more classroom capacity and serve more children, and because 70 per cent of the children in Hub sites access PUF, they draw more children from the broader transportation zone. Satellite sites serve fewer children accessing PUF and the majority of children are from the immediate school community.

In short, DSS and Student Transportation work side by side around the placement process and transportation logistics; this centralized approach helps to make effective decisions regarding Pre-Kindergarten placements and promotes system efficiencies. However, schools are still in the best position to make the final decision for site and classroom placements and DSS and Student Transportation work in close collaboration with school leaders and families.

How Do We Know our Pre-Kindergarten Model is Effective?

While a large body of research exists that confirms the positive impact of early childhood programs on later success in school and life-long learning, we are just beginning to gather our own data to track the effectiveness of the District's approach to Pre-Kindergarten programming on developmental outcomes. To date, there is preliminary data related to growth demonstrated by children with severe language delay. In 2016-2017, data showed that 79 children who were identified as having a severe language delay in Pre-Kindergarten made significant gains and only had a mild-moderate language delay when they entered Kindergarten in the fall. We also know that approximately 70 additional children with a severe language delay who came from a Pre-Kindergarten program outside our District were identified as having a moderate or mild delay when they entered a District Kindergarten program. This is approximately 149 children who have made significant progress in their language development through local early intervention programs. This trend shows overall growth and confirms that early intervention for children with speech and language delays makes a measurable difference.

A more comprehensive longitudinal study to examine the impact of Pre-Kindergarten on later success in Kindergarten and beyond is planned for September 2018.

In summary, the District's delivery of Pre-Kindergarten programming will continue to be informed by research, the findings from the initial pilot and through lessons learned through these first years of expansion. The District aims to provide programming closest to where the children live, to be strategic in locating programs in communities serving high numbers of ELL, Indigenous and socially complex families and to remain responsive to the needs of our youngest learners and their families. From Pre-Kindergarten children transition up to Kindergarten programming as their next step on their learning journey.

Kindergarten

Alberta Education provides universal funding for all children who are 4 years and 6 months old to start Kindergarten but it is parental choice to send their child to Kindergarten, as Kindergarten is not a provincially mandated program. Though the city's population of 0-4 year olds has remained stable, Edmonton Public Schools has experienced a steady increase in the number of children participating in Kindergarten programs from 2014 onwards. Currently, there are approximately 7,676 children attending a District Kindergarten program. This is an increase of 8.8 per cent or approximately 677 children since 2014. While some children transition into Kindergarten from a Pre-Kindergarten or other ECS program, there are many other children for whom Kindergarten is their first school experience.

Edmonton Public Schools offers Kindergarten at all of its 167 elementary schools. Of these 167 programs, 141 are traditional half day programs and 26 are Full-day Kindergarten programs, strategically placed in schools where the student population faces higher social complexity or vulnerability and would benefit from the enrichment of a full-day program.

All District Kindergarten programming is fully inclusive, play-based and provides children the opportunity to socialize, get to know the children in their community and become familiar with the school environment. Programming is based upon Alberta Education's Kindergarten program statement which is focused around seven curricular areas: early literacy, early numeracy, citizenship and identity, environment and community awareness, personal and social responsibility, physical skills and well-being and creative expression. Each of these areas provides the foundation for later success in Grade 1 and beyond and are not taught in isolation but in an integrated, holistic manner. It is the role of the Kindergarten teacher to provide universal learning experiences in a

play-based environment to expose children to these seven curricular areas and include targeted and specialized supports for children who may benefit from additional learning strategies.

Children can also benefit from starting Kindergarten at District schools that offer languages or alternate programs and different teaching philosophies. Regardless of the school or program chosen, every child is welcome in Kindergarten and learning is focused on individual strengths and areas for growth.

Full-day Kindergarten

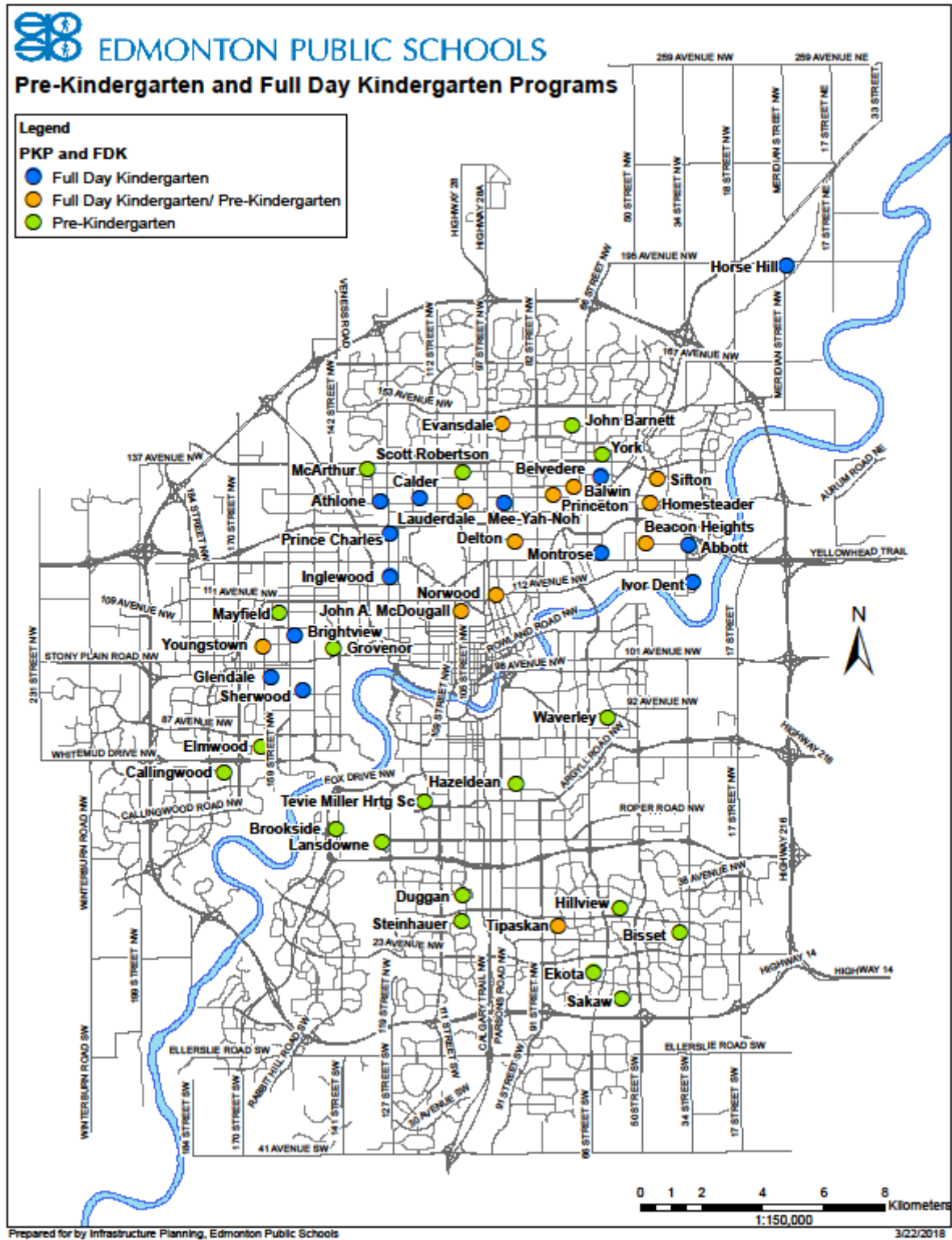
Research (da Costa, 2008) shows that Full-day Kindergarten has a positive and long lasting impact for children who come from low socio-economic or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and who would most benefit from extra time in class engaged in learning activities that prepare them socially and academically for Grade 1 and beyond.

Alberta Education provides funding for 475 hours of instruction for Kindergarten, which typically equates to a half-day program five days a week. Through District efforts a Full-day Kindergarten program is supported in 26 District schools. This reflects the combined commitment of the Board of Trustees and the focused work of Edmonton Public Schools' Foundation. The Foundation currently raises support for six Full-day Kindergarten programs. The remaining programs are funded through the District's annual allocation; this commitment of targeted funding for Full-day Kindergarten is a reflection of the Board of Trustees' support for early intervention and an acknowledgement of the importance of learning for our most vulnerable children.

Programming for Full-day Kindergarten is the same as it is for Kindergarten but provides extra time for children to build important skills and support the development of the literacy, numeracy and social-emotional domains that are the foundation to their school learning journey and life beyond school. For the 2017-2018 year, there are 875 children enrolled in a Full-day Kindergarten program.



The following map provides an overview of accessibility to enriched early years programming with the placement of Pre-Kindergarten and Full-day Kindergarten sites across District schools. The map is colour coded to distinguish what early years programming is specific to each school site.



EARLY YEARS EVALUATION-TEACHER ASSESSMENT (EYE-TA)

An important role of the Kindergarten teacher is to help identify children who need specialized supports and services. The Early Years Evaluation-Teacher Assessment (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. Each fall, using the EYE-TA, all Kindergarten teachers gather information through observations and play-based activities to assess each child's individual developmental readiness at the start of the Kindergarten year. The five developmental domains evaluated are:

1. Awareness of Self and Environment: a child's understanding of the world and his/her ability to make connections with home and community experiences.
2. Social Skills and Approaches to Learning: a child's attentiveness during classroom activities and his/her ability to interact with peers while respecting classroom rules.
3. Cognitive Skills: a child's basic mathematics and pre-reading skills and his/her ability to solve problems.
4. Language and Communication: a child's understanding of spoken language and his/her ability to express thoughts and feelings.
5. Physical Development:
 - a. Fine Motor: a child's ability to perform small movements that require hand-eye coordination.
 - b. Gross Motor: a child's ability to perform large movements that involve arms, legs and body.

Fall results are used to inform teacher practice using the Pyramid of Intervention to review which children are showing appropriate development, which children are experiencing some difficulty and which children are experiencing significant difficulty. Teachers can view results for individual children and class profiles; individual child reports are shared with parents in the fall, along with documentation of the child's strengths and areas for growth. The results of the fall EYE-TA assessment serve as the formal progress report for children in Kindergarten.

Using the results from the EYE-TA as one source of data, teachers are able to strategically program for the developmental and learning needs of children in their class. The EYE-TA is administered again in the spring. This second use of the tool measures for growth and provides most up-to-date data around each child's readiness for Grade 1.

Over the past three years, through the collaborative efforts of classroom teachers, the Inclusive Learning team and parents, more than 80 per cent of children leaving District Kindergarten programs were meeting EYE-TA developmental milestones indicating readiness for Grade 1. Staff strive to build upon this success and work towards seeing even more children reach this important developmental milestone. To achieve this goal, the ongoing collaboration with the Inclusive Learning School-Linked team, families and teachers to discuss EYE-TA results and assist the teacher in providing the right programming strategies and supports for each child's learning will be an important partnership.

The following chart shows the results of the EYE-TA over the past five years for all District Kindergarten children. Pre and post EYE-TA results have only been available since 2015. This pre and post comparison demonstrates the growth that occurs throughout the Kindergarten year.

Early Years Evaluation - Teacher Assessment and District Indicators	Results (in percentages)				
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Early Years Evaluation – Teacher Assessment Percentage of children entering (pre) and leaving (post)* District Kindergarten programs that meet developmental milestones.	61	63	62 (fall) 81 (spring) (19 per cent)	61 (fall) 81 (spring) (20 per cent)	62 (fall) 82 (spring) (20 per cent)

			improvement)	improvement)	improvement)
• Awareness of Self and Environment.	78	82	80 (fall) 92 (spring) (12 per cent improvement)	80 (fall) 92 (spring) (12 per cent improvement)	80 (fall) 92 (spring) (12 per cent improvement)
• Social Skills and Approaches to Learning.	75	76	75 (fall) 89 (spring) (14 per cent improvement)	77 (fall) 89 (spring) (12 per cent improvement)	77 (fall) 89 (spring) (12 per cent improvement)
• Cognitive Skills.	62	64	64 (fall) 90 (spring) (34 per cent improvement)	62 (fall) 89 (spring) (27 per cent improvement)	62 (fall) 89 (spring) (27 per cent improvement)
• Language and Communication.	73	77	75 (fall) 88 (spring) (13 per cent improvement)	75 (fall) 88 (spring) (13 per cent improvement)	76 (fall) 89 (spring) (13 per cent improvement)
• Physical Development. o Fine Motor.	69	70	70 (fall) 93 (spring) (23 per cent improvement)	70 (fall) 92 (spring) (22 per cent improvement)	69 (fall) 92 (spring) (23 per cent improvement)
o Gross Motor.	78	79	77 (fall) 93 (spring) (16 per cent improvement)	76 (fall) 92 (spring) (16 per cent improvement)	79 (fall) 93 (spring) (14 per cent improvement)

Notes:

- EYE-TA post assessments began in the 2014-2015 school year.
- Improvement for EYE-TA is based on spring-results compared to fall-results.

INCLUSIVE LEARNING SCHOOL-LINKED TEAMS

A significant role of Inclusive Learnings' work in Kindergarten is the identification of children who require additional supports and services and providing classroom consultation support for teachers. Typically, Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) and Occupational Therapists (OTs) follow up with children who are experiencing difficulty and may complete a formal assessment for PUF or MM funding. Other Inclusive Learning team members who may be involved in the Kindergarten classroom include: Early Years teacher consultants, School Family Liaisons, Psychologists, Physical Therapists, Adapted Physical Education Consultants, Speech Language Assistants, Occupational Therapy Assistants and Educational Assistants.

Educational Assistants (EAs) are an important part of the Kindergarten classroom, particularly in supporting children accessing PUF. EAs are placed in classrooms where children with complex needs require targeted or specialized supports for behavior challenges, safety risks, self-care, mobility and communication or language development. Inclusive Learning employs over 130 educational assistants to support children in Kindergarten. Professional development for Inclusive Learning Educational Assistants is ongoing throughout the year and includes certification in Non-Violent Crisis Intervention and sessions such as trauma informed care, autism, anxiety and self-regulation, the 12 types of play, language and literacy intervention, Hanen "Learning Language and Loving it" program, cultural sensitivity training and strategies to support English language learners and Indigenous children.

Below is a table that shows the steady increase in complexity of children across District Kindergarten classrooms while illustrating that fewer children with language delays are accessing PUF, possibly due to increased access to early intervention programs such as Pre-Kindergarten. Notable is the increase in children with autism and children with emotional-behavioural delays which adds to complexity in the classroom. This early identification of children with complex needs is critical for early intervention and to ensure appropriate supports and programming are in place to promote success, confidence and well-being as a learner.

Profile of Kindergarten Children

Special Education Code 1	28-Feb-15	29-Feb-16	28-Feb-17
10 Developmentally Immature	15	34	31
30 Mild- Moderate Delay	860	922	934
42 Emotional-Behavioural	34	104	66
43 Physical-Medical	6	9	9
44 Multiple Disability	24	37	20
45 Deafness	2	1	2
46 Blindness	2		
47 Language Delay	521	503	447
80 Gifted	3	1	2
Special 44-24 Autism	27	56	69
No Special Code	5339	5445	5639
Kindergarten Total*	6833	7112	7219

* These numbers do not include Kindergarten aged children at the following schools: Beacon Heights, Elmwood, Evansdale, Hillview, Hazeldean, John Barnett, Mayfield, Scott Robertson, Tevie Miller and Waverley. These Kindergarten classrooms are served by the Hub school Pre-Kindergarten teams.

EARLY YEARS INITIATIVES

Reflecting the District's commitment to quality early years programming, the following initiatives are examples of work happening across District schools that support and explore how we can continue to strengthen our work in this area and help more children reach developmental milestones.

Supporting Children who are not yet Meeting EYE-TA Developmental Milestones

As stated previously, more than 80 per cent of children leaving District Kindergarten programs are meeting EYE-TA developmental milestones indicating readiness for Grade 1. However this also means that approximately 19 per cent of children who continue on to Grade 1 are still exhibiting difficulty or great difficulty in one or more areas as indicated by the spring EYE-TA results. The District is taking a deliberate look at the areas of Language and Communication, Cognitive Skills, and Social Skills and Approaches to Learning, as these three areas have the highest number of children not yet meeting appropriate development. In response to this data, two initiatives were launched in 2015-2016: the Language and Literacy Project and the Math Interactive Learning Experience (MILE) Research Study.

- **Language and Literacy Project**

The Language and Literacy project is a District developed approach to literacy instruction and intervention. It has been informed by expertise from the following: Speech Language Pathologist (SLP), a reading specialist and ESL consultants. This team of specialists reviewed research and evidence-based strategies to support the development of children's oral language skills which impact long-term literacy growth. The research supports five areas of literacy instruction focus:

- phonological awareness
- oral language
- print awareness
- vocabulary development
- reciprocal teaching (Reciprocal teaching is designed to enhance comprehension in the classroom by enabling students to take on a more active role in discussing their texts, usually in small group reading session)

This is not a prescribed program; rather, it is a way to bring effective evidence-based strategies into the classroom to enhance what teachers are already doing to build literacy skills in their students. The initiative began in Grade 1 classrooms and has evolved to include Kindergarten and Grades 2 and 3.

Initially schools were invited to participate based on the results of the EYE-TA to identify children transitioning to Grade 1 and at risk for later challenges with literacy success. Each year, additional schools, grade levels and teachers have been added to the project. Currently 76 teachers from 21 schools are participating in the project. Teachers receive three full-day professional learning days throughout the year to build knowledge, share ideas, gain new resources and practice new strategies. Teachers are also provided with release time to engage in visitations to other classrooms, to meet in a collaborative community of practice within catchments and to access consultants to support questions and programming. To broaden the reach or impact of lessons learned from this approach to early literacy instruction, four videos and accompanying tip sheets have been developed to be used and shared by teachers across the District.

Preliminary results from the project indicate that vocabulary development is increased by 48 per cent and teachers increased the frequency of intentional oral language development and the use of reciprocal teaching by 25 per cent. Students made connections to content 33 per cent more frequently. Ongoing research will continue to measure the impact on student success and teacher confidence.

- **MILE Study**

Math Interactive Learning Experience (MILE) research study was implemented in partnership with the University of Alberta and focuses on strategies to improve math skill development for children with developmental difficulties who were in Kindergarten or Grade 1. During the 2016-2017 school year, six schools and 11 teachers and/or educational assistants (EAs) initially agreed to participate. Initially, a total of 28 students with severe behavioral challenges or diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder, such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, were part of the study. Part way through this study, three of the participating schools stepped back from this initiative. Emerging learnings from this study indicate challenges around teacher time required to properly train for and implement the strategies with their students. Despite the challenges faced by teachers, the study demonstrated positive math skill development and retention for the students requiring specialized supports who fully participated in this work. Preliminary analysis indicated that:

- Eighty six per cent (12/14) of students who completed the intervention improved by at least one standard deviation in at least one mathematical area.
- Fifty seven per cent (8/14) improved in at least two areas.
- Twenty eight per cent (4/14) improved in at least three areas.
- Fourteen per cent (2/14) improved in four areas.
- MILE students also retained learning after six months and fared better in mathematical understanding and had higher math scores than a control group.

Next steps will be to identify strategies teachers can implement as universal and targeted (small group) supports for all children, begin a process of knowledge translation and capacity building in teachers from Kindergarten to Grade 3 and measure the broader impact upon student's mathematical understanding and performance in regular classroom settings.

Initiatives that Support Families

The District's Early Years Guiding Document recognizes that family is the child's first and most important teacher, and the outcome for Priority 3 Goal 1 is to provide families with opportunities to be involved in their child's education. Families play an important role in Early Years programs and the following initiatives help build strong and positive relationships and partnerships with schools and families at the very beginning of a child's educational experience.

The 2017 District Feedback survey results indicate that 89 per cent of Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten parents understand what their child must do to be successful in Kindergarten and Grade 1. However, it is important for Early Years staff to continue to share knowledge and best practices with parents so they can provide enriching experiences to support their child's educational journey and life-long learning. Current research in the field of neuroscience and early childhood education provides important information to help parents understand developmental milestones and what they can do at home to support their child's development and enhance expectations for success in school and later in life.

- **Welcome to the Early Years: Building Parent Capacity Project**

This research project is in response to the Career Pathways initiative to assist parents in selecting experiences that will help their child explore opportunities for successful lifelong learning, living and working. Using resources from the *Alberta Family Wellness Initiative* and the *Welcome to Kindergarten* program through the Learning Partnership, parents will learn about the core story of brain development and the importance of positive interactions, inquiry, play and language rich experiences to increase their child's ability to learn and participate in school.

Twenty Kindergarten teachers will participate in this project and host two or three information sessions for their Kindergarten families over the course of the following school year. To prepare for the project,

participating teachers attended a professional learning day in March to provide them with the resources and processes to support them hosting the parent information sessions. Parents and teachers will take part in a pre and post survey to measure how well this approach to family engagement is building parent capacity around the types of experiences they can provide at home and the usefulness of the resources.

- **First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Family Liaison**

To support schools in their efforts to build trusting and positive relationships with families of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit early learners, the District has initiated the Family Liaison project. This project is in its beginning stages and is focused around seven District schools with Pre-Kindergarten programs. At this time, one family liaison worker has been hired and work is underway to hire the second liaison worker.

The Family Liaison worker has been available to support families during Pre-Kindergarten screening events and has offered culturally responsive Family Oriented Programming (FOPs) opportunities for families at several Pre-Kindergarten sites. FOP sessions included PowWow practice and storytelling/ribbon shirt & skirt making sessions with an Elder. This is a positive step forward in offering Pre-Kindergarten programming that feels welcoming and inclusive for families of Indigenous children.

Initiatives that Support High Quality Early Years Programming

As Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten programs continue to grow, supporting high quality early years programming is increasingly important. Ensuring we have the very best staff in our Early Years programs means continued work-force planning that includes current professional learning and access to relevant resources for teachers, administrators, support and exempt staff working with young children. The following initiatives address the need to provide ongoing support for Early Years programs and the staff supporting them.

- **Early Years Resources and Professional Learning**

In April 2017, the District's Early Years Online Resources were completed. The resources have been developed around the four early childhood pathways: teacher and learner disposition, the learning environment, design for learning and assessment. Each pathway is aligned with the Teaching Quality Standards and the Alberta Education requirements for early childhood programming. Teachers and principals can use these resources to design and evaluate their Pre-Kindergarten or Kindergarten programs. The resources were developed to be used as part of ongoing professional learning and include tools, visuals and research to support each of the four early childhood pathways:

- **Inquiry and Play Community of Practice**

A monthly *Inquiry and Play* community of practice takes place after school from 4:00–5:30 p.m. and is voluntarily attended by Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers. Attendance ranges from 45 to over 90 teachers. Conversations are facilitated by teachers and based on topics of professional interest. Early Years teachers volunteer to host a session at their school, so the location varies each month. The Inclusive Learning Early Years teacher consultants share information about the community of practice through Bulletin Board, via email to their catchments and word of mouth. This grassroots community of practice has been a powerful mechanism for teachers to connect and share practices, research and ideas in an informal and meaningful way.

- **First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Resources and Professional Learning**

To support quality, culturally appropriate programming within Early Years classrooms the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education unit staff provided the following supports:

- A full-day session for 120 Kindergarten educational assistants to build their knowledge, understanding and awareness around First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education, learnings included the blanket exercise, information about Truth and Reconciliation and Indigenous cultural activities that can be incorporated into the classroom setting.

- Culturally responsive resources, such as the First Nations Early Learning Edukit, the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit recommended literature list and support for using Cree lullabies in the classroom have been made available to staff working with young children.
- **Forest and Nature School: Building Positive Mental Health**

In 2016-2017, a Forest and Nature school project began at Roberta MacAdams School in the two Kindergarten programs to address social-emotional development, positive mental health and physical literacy through outdoor play for young children. According to Sarah Blackwell (2015) long-term forest school programming promotes an increase in resiliency, confidence, a positive impact on children's physical and mental health and improves social and cognitive competence in children. Research shows that outdoor play environments are rich in sensory stimulation, contribute to literacy development, foster an appreciation of the natural world and support the development of naturalistic intelligence and biophilia (a natural affinity for living things)(Wilson, 2008.). Ruth Wilson (2008) also suggests that outdoor play environments support the whole child and the development of communication, mental, physical, social and emotional health through repeated exposure to natural outdoor environments.

A key element for this project was the hiring and training of a Nature school practitioner, along with two Kindergarten teachers to provide daily outdoor experiences in the natural environment of Blackmud Creek ravine near the school. Training for the Nature school practitioner included an Environmental Education course through Cornell University, an outdoor play training course through the University of British Columbia, and the Forest and Nature school practitioners' level 1 - 3 courses.

While further data collection is needed, there is positive impact on Kindergarten children's abilities in the physical domain such as improved core strength, balance, increased physical confidence and competence and body awareness. Perhaps the greatest growth can be seen in the social-emotional domain such as improved problem solving abilities, sensory awareness and emotional intelligence such as self-regulation, self-awareness, social skills, empathy, motivation and improved behaviour.

Several professional learning opportunities to share this initiative with other catchment teachers and educational assistants have occurred as have parent inservices to provide information about Forest and Nature School to a wider audience. Further work to study the impact of engagement in the natural environment on learning and positive mental health of young children will be explored in the coming year.



- **Hanen Training**

Hanen training provides strategies for helping children in early years classrooms build language and social skills, no matter what their learning and communication styles are. The program is delivered by a trained Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) or early childhood consultant to teachers and EAs working with young children. Inclusive Learning has set a long-term goal to train all District Kindergarten educational assistants in Hanen's *Learning Language and Loving It (LLLL)* program. To date, over 90 EAs, as well as 11 speech language assistants have received the training. Once trained, staff are able to work with individual children or with small groups, under the direction of an SLP, to facilitate language development. To support delivering the program in the District, Inclusive Learning currently has 19 SLPs who are certified to teach the *LLLL* program.

In summary, each of these initiatives responds to areas of need for children, families and the staff who work in early years programs. Monitoring of these initiatives will continue to measure their impact on high quality early years programming and continue to inform District practice and decision making in the area of early learning.

CONCLUSION: COUNTING THE NEXT STEPS

Our results tell us that we are on the right track to supporting an excellent start to learning with more children entering Grade 1 reaching emotional, social, intellectual and physical developmental milestones. Continuing with the work already underway and developing measures to effectively capture the impact of early years programs and initiatives on later success in school will be an important focus over the next four years.

Areas for consideration will include:

- positive mental health support for children and families
- increased family and community engagement
- continued support of high quality teaching and leadership in early years programs
- continued review of Pre-Kindergarten Program locations
- continued attention to early years research, with strategic intent around the OECD's *Promising Practices in Supporting Success for Indigenous Students*

The early years matter a great deal. Deliberate and strategic efforts by the District will continue to reflect collaboration, equitable access to supports and services, high expectations, monitoring areas for growth and celebration of the successes of our youngest learners.



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