

DATE: December 19, 2017

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Student Assessments – Elementary Aged Students
(Response to Request for Information #002)

ORIGINATOR: Leona Morrison, Assistant Superintendent

**RESOURCE
STAFF:** Brenda Gummer, Director Inclusive Learning - Specialized Services
Natalie Prytuluk, Director, Inclusive Learning - Early Years

REFERENCE: October 24, 2017 Board Meeting (Trustee Gibson)
[Alberta Education Coding Criteria](#)
[Standards for the Provision of Early Childhood Special Education](#)
[Standards for Special Education](#)
[Pyramid of Intervention](#)

ISSUES

The following information was requested:

1. Enrolment of elementary aged students, including children coded with mild, moderate, and severe special needs continues to rise for Edmonton Public Schools. What strategies does the District employ to ensure each Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, Division 1 and Division 2 student is assessed by the appropriate professionals for learning challenges?
2. Does the District receive sufficient funding for timely assessments? If not, does the District track the size and trend in the numbers of students awaiting assessments?
3. Is there an argument for advocacy that the additional costs of sufficient early assessments is more than recovered by reducing the costs of interventions that are put in place because the learning challenge has not been identified in a timely manner?

BACKGROUND

Inclusive Learning is comprised of nine multi-disciplinary School-linked Service Teams that offer services ranging from general classroom consultation, individual child or student consultation, capacity-building conversations, targeted professional learning and specialized assessment. Services provided by the teams are dependent on the presenting needs of the child or student. Inclusive Learning collaborates directly with schools to support children and students in need of specialized supports and services, including informal and formal assessments, from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

The approach to supporting schools is modeled on the Pyramid of Intervention, a multi-tiered framework of intervention. Through collaborative conversations with schools, service needs are defined and prioritized to identify, develop and share inclusive education strategies and provide universal, targeted and specialized supports.

Each school chooses a system for the identification of students at risk. Many schools complete a Learner Profile to summarize and identify what strategies have been implemented and the effectiveness of each strategy. Referrals for consultation and assessment for children/students in Kindergarten to Grade 12, are managed through Inclusive Learning. This structure meets requirements of the Alberta Education's Standards for Special Education, by providing specialized supports and services through a coordinated multi-disciplinary team approach.

For children in Pre-Kindergarten or Kindergarten with severe disabilities or delays, Program Unit Funding (PUF) must be applied for each child individually through a process that requires formal assessment and completion of an educational environment impact statement outlining how the child is functioning in the classroom setting. PUF is a fluctuating amount each year and is dependent on the number of children meeting eligibility requirements as identified and assessed by the multi-disciplinary team. For children with mild or moderate disabilities or delays, a portion of the Inclusive Education grant is allocated by the District to support these children.

In Kindergarten, consultants complete identification and assessment for the majority of children by the end of November. During this process, schools submit requests for service for children with moderate or severe needs.

For students in Grades 1 through 12, Alberta Education allocates funding to school boards as part of an Inclusive Education grant. Edmonton Public Schools uses these dollars to directly support student programming in schools as well as the Inclusive Learning unit for the staff and resources to provide multi-disciplinary consultative supports and specialized assessment.

Overall, the number of requests for service from Kindergarten to Grade 12 has remained relatively stable over the past five years (approximately 13,800). This includes all of the disciplines and is a combination of consultation, informal and formal assessment. With the addition of one more team this year, we anticipate a slight increase in the number of requests for service.

CURRENT SITUATION

1. Enrolment of elementary aged students, including children coded with mild, moderate, and severe special needs continues to rise for Edmonton Public Schools. What strategies does the District employ to ensure each Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, Division 1 and Division 2 student is assessed by the appropriate professionals for learning challenges?

The following strategies are implemented in response to requests for service and to determine next steps:

- To pre-identify children who meet criteria for mild, moderate or severe funding, a District-wide screening process conducted by staff at District Pre-Kindergarten programs is held in March. This work is done in partnership with Alberta Health Services. Alberta Health Services provides assessments in the areas of speech and language, and occupational therapy. Identifying children with delays and/or disabilities prior to Kindergarten helps children access intervention earlier.
- Every fall, the Early Years Evaluation-Teacher Assessment (EYE-TA) is used as a screening tool for all Kindergarten children. This tool provides information for the multi-disciplinary team in collaboration with the classroom teacher to identify children who require additional assessment to confirm developmental delays or disabilities.
- Parents/caregivers are encouraged to share with the school any relevant diagnostic and programming information about their child from outside community partners and agencies. This information is helpful for programming.

- Using the Pyramid of Intervention as a framework, schools collaborate with Inclusive Learning School-linked teams to implement universal and targeted strategies. Student responses to implementation of strategies is evaluated and discussed to inform next steps for further programming supports or formalized assessment. Student's response to targeted intervention is required for specialist(s) to identify or diagnose various learning disabilities.
 - Inclusive Learning supervisors use a queuing system for requests for assessment. Supervisors work closely with schools to prioritize referrals and may base decisions on factors such as student need, student age, attendance, and number of schools attended to name a few. There is a caution related to standardized psychological assessment of very young children, particularly for children with language delays. For children and students whose first language is not English, consultation with English as a Second Language and Intercultural consultants is required. If a student's attendance is poor or if they have attended multiple schools in a relatively short period of time, academic instruction has been interrupted and formal assessment is not advised until attendance is stabilized.
 - Depending on how needs are prioritized, requests may be addressed immediately or slotted after higher priority requests. Schools are asked to keep parents/caregivers informed when their child's assessment is scheduled.
 - Inclusive Learning supervisors monitor assessment queues and work thoughtfully to ensure equity of service, fair distribution of District resources and balanced workloads for specialists. They use specialists who are District employees and access approved external vendors to help meet demand for standardized assessments.
 - Inclusive Learning assists families, as required, to access additional consultation from secondary and tertiary health agencies (e.g. Glenrose Clinics, CASA). Usually, specialized assessment is completed as part of this support.
 - Our District has clear standards for all professionals assessing children and students. Compliance with these standards is monitored through District Support Services and various Alberta Professional Colleges (i.e. Charter of the College of Alberta Psychologists).
2. Does the District receive sufficient funding for timely assessments? If not, does the District track the size and trend in the numbers of students awaiting assessments?
- Currently we believe there are sufficient funds available to support assessment processes. Funds are provided through Alberta Education as part of block funding, and in addition, Central Equity Funds are also used. For example, in 2016-2017, \$800,000 was utilized and this year, there is \$1.2 million budgeted based upon an allotment of \$200,000 per Assistant Superintendent.
 - Inclusive Learning aims to provide assessment at the right time, for the right reason. A learner's progress is closely monitored over time and supports are adjusted and reviewed through collaborative conversations with all stakeholders.
 - Challenges can occur when external demands are made of District resources for psycho-educational assessments. External demands may be made by families, community counsellors or physicians but the student may be performing well in their school environment.
 - As more children requiring specialized support are identified earlier through screening, and as access to Pre-Kindergarten is increased, multi-disciplinary teams will be able to provide intervention for two or three years prior to Grade 1. Children identified with delays do not necessarily require psycho-educational assessments but may benefit from continued intervention in the areas of speech-language development or occupational therapy.
 - Increased parental awareness of child development and developmental milestones is important. Families need to know what to do if they have concerns about their child's overall development. Information to help families support their child can be accessed through community partners such as Alberta Health Services and through family orientation sessions in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten.

3. Is there an argument for advocacy that the additional costs of sufficient early assessments is more than recovered by reducing the costs of interventions that are put in place because the learning challenge has not been identified in a timely manner?
- Early intervention has a profound impact on later success in school. From an advocacy perspective, continued support for Early Childhood Services programs and funding for children with mild, moderate and severe delays, ensures children have access to supports and services that benefit their development and learning. Being proactive by identifying, assessing and diagnosing children sooner, means they transition into formal schooling with many strategies already in place.
 - Systems of intervention are in place throughout the District such as the Pyramid of Intervention framework, to identify students who would benefit most from specialized assessment.
 - A formal assessment is not required before interventions or supports are implemented. If students respond well to interventions and targeted accommodations then there is often no need for a formal assessment.
 - The ultimate goal is a multi-pronged approach consisting of:
 - High quality, differentiated instruction provided through an engaging, strengths-based approach.
 - Timely targeted interventions for students experiencing difficulties in specific areas of skill deficit. This helps filter out students who have gaps in their learning versus those with on-going learning challenges that need to be assessed for possible disorder.
 - The administration of specialized assessments is impacted by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders which outlines criteria for diagnosis of disorders. Statistically 12 to 15 per cent of a population should be identified as requiring special education supports.

KEY POINTS

- Nine multi-disciplinary School-linked Service Teams offer general classroom and individual student consultation, targeted professional learning and specialized assessment.
- The Pyramid of Intervention is used as a framework through which universal, targeted and specialized supports are determined.
- Pre-Kindergarten screening to determine eligibility for programming occurs in March and assessments for PUF or mild-moderate funding are completed by the Pre-Kindergarten multi-disciplinary team or health services. Kindergarten screening occurs in the fall using the Early Years Evaluation-Teacher Assessment (EYE-TA) and provides information for the Inclusive Learning multi-disciplinary team to identify children who require additional assessment.
- Inclusive Learning Supervisors work closely with schools to prioritize referrals and closely monitor the queue to ensure the work is completed.
- Sufficient funds are provided through Alberta Education and a Central Equity Fund is also used to cover the cost of additional assessments.
- Continued advocacy for Early Childhood Services programming and funding ensures children have access to supports and services to benefit their development and learning. Identifying, assessing and diagnosing children sooner, means they transition into formal schooling with many strategies already in place.
- We strive to provide a multi-pronged approach consisting of high quality differentiated instruction, timely and targeted interventions and specialized assessment when required.

ATTACHMENTS and APPENDICES

N/A

BG:dll