

DATE: June 23, 2020

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Division plan to collect lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic
(Response to Request for Information #71)

ORIGINATOR: Karen Mills, Director Board and Superintendent Relations

**RESOURCE
STAFF:** Janice Aubry, Terry Korte, Kathy Muhlethaler, Ann Parker, Nancy Petersen,
Christopher Wright, Re-entry Committee

ISSUE

At the April 28, 2020, public Board meeting, Trustee Gibson requested the following information: What is the Division's plan to collect lessons learned from current online delivery of education in the event there is a second shut-down due to COVID-19 in late 2020 or in 2021?

BACKGROUND

On March 3, Dr. Hinshaw, Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health, confirmed that there were no COVID-19 cases in Alberta. On March 5, the first case of COVID-19 in Alberta was confirmed. On March 10, the risk of exposure was still classified as low and caution around travel was suggested.

By March 11, there were 19 confirmed cases in Alberta and on March 12, Dr. Hinshaw announced that, faced with the "rapidly evolving global threat", the provincial government had adopted aggressive new public health measures such as a ban on all meetings of more than 250 people and a 14-day self-isolation period for anyone who had travelled from outside of Canada.

On March 15, the Alberta government cancelled all Kindergarten through Grade 12 classes indefinitely to help contain the spread of COVID-19.

On April 30, Premier Kenney announced that in-person classes would be cancelled for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.

On May 6, the Minister of Education introduced three scenarios being considered for school re-entry in September 2020:

1. In-school classes resume (near normal operations with health measures)
2. In-school classes partially resume with additional health measures
3. At home learning continues (in-school classes are cancelled)

On June 10, 2020, the province introduced their School Re-entry Plan and guidance documents for Scenarios 1 and 2 and stated that their preferred plan was a resumption of in-person classes in the fall.

CURRENT SITUATION

One of the key lessons learned to date is that in a pandemic, things can change very quickly. Being as prepared as possible for all eventualities provides assurance and contributes to a consistent, efficient response. Given this, the Division has been collecting and acting on lessons learned in response to the pandemic since February.

Lessons learned informed this school year

In February, a Contagious Disease Preparedness Planning Committee was formed, with representatives from across Division units. One of the first exercises the committee undertook was a review of Division plans and lessons learned from previous public health crises (e.g., SARS, H1N1). The committee also compiled and reviewed plans from other school jurisdictions and provincial organizations. The Research and Innovation for Student Learning unit compiled and continues to add to an online repository of articles and reports from around the world on school responses to COVID-19. The review of all of these materials and subsequent meetings with the committee and administration informed the Division's early approach to the pandemic response, which emphasized:

- Student and staff health and safety as paramount and we will follow the direction and guidance of the Chief Medical Officer of Health
- The importance of relationships and maintaining and building connections with staff, students and their families, and our community partners
- Collaboration, both within and outside of the Division
- Clear, frequent communication with all affected stakeholders
- Multidisciplinary planning committees
- Strong support of access to and use of technology for staff and students
- An iterative approach to resource development that incorporates feedback to foster continuous improvement
- Free sharing of resources and best practices with anyone who could benefit from them

This approach informed the early work in the Division to support students, staff and families as everyone adjusted to online and remote learning. Details on the Division's early response to the pandemic can be found in the report, [Edmonton Public Schools response to COVID-19](#), presented at the April 28, 2020, public Board meeting.

Keeping open lines of communication has been key to learning lessons and sharing new supports and adaptations that have been developed as a result of those lessons.

Assistant Superintendents held daily meetings with their catchment principals in March and April and continue to meet with these groups multiple times per week to both give and gather information. An online Q&A system was also developed in which principals could submit questions and receive answers and guidance from central administration. At first, questions were responded to within 24 hours; as school routines and protocols are now more established, responses are provided weekly. Q&A information and discussion highlights are shared with planning committee leads to ensure that school voice is informing their work.

Wherever possible, existing communication sources have been mined for lessons. For example, when the Technology and Information Management unit was hearing from staff that parents needed guidance setting up and navigating technology, they developed and staffed Techhelp.epsb.ca, a new website to help families set up technology at home for distance and online learning. Dedicated pages were added

to epsb.ca with coronavirus information and resources for Distance and Online Learning based on feedback from schools that not all parents could or wanted to access SchoolZone.

Through existing communication channels, school staff requested online professional learning to support them in moving to online instruction and distance education. The Division offered several courses on a wide range of topics. Feedback made it clear that the “on demand”, accessible nature of these courses was very popular and useful for staff, and is now informing professional development planning for the coming year.

Cancellations and fee refunds made necessary due to COVID-19 are also informing reviews of Division processes. For example, issues around travel insurance, contract reviews, payment schedules and communication with parents are all being reviewed.

The refund of transportation and school fees also brought the opportunity to review that system and highlight areas for improvement. Technology and Information Management and Financial Services created short-term, and often resource intensive, fixes for challenges and are now working on more comprehensive and efficient long-term solutions.

An overarching lesson from the first months of the pandemic is the importance of the Division’s Cornerstone Values: accountability, collaboration, equity and integrity. The following illustrative examples show how those values were demonstrated for the benefit of students.

- **Accountability:** Frequent messaging to staff, students, families and partners helped ensure that everyone was aware of the Division’s plans and actions.
- **Collaboration:** High school principals and central staff, with input from students, worked together to put in place graduation ceremonies that celebrated the achievements of students even though in-person events were not possible.
- **Equity:** The Division loaned over 16,000 Chromebooks to students, worked with donors to provide almost 400 free Chromebooks to socially vulnerable families, and facilitated low-cost Chromebook purchase options and internet access to help level the digital playing field for students.
- **Integrity:** The upheaval to the education system and the pace of change have been unprecedented. The uncertainty has created sustained stress; however, the culture of kindness, mutual support and a strengths-based approach has buoyed the Division through this challenging time.

These values will continue to be the foundation for our work as we plan for the coming school year.

Lessons learned will inform the coming school year

With the announcement that in-person classes would remain cancelled for the rest of the academic year, the Contagious Disease Preparedness Planning Committee ended its work and the Superintendent directed the formation of a Re-entry Committee. The focus of this committee is to prepare a Division plan for a return to learning in September. The Re-entry Committee formed three sub-committees, one for each of the scenarios proposed by the Minister of Education. Each sub-committee includes representatives from a variety of central units as well as principals representing all grade levels and a variety of catchments.

Each sub-committee began their work by reviewing and documenting lessons learned since the onset of COVID-19. These lessons were shared within and across all sub-committees to inform the plans for a return to learning in September.

Planning for the upcoming year is also being informed by interest-specific groups and partners. For example:

- The high school principal group has offered valuable input into the plans for graduation and course scheduling
- The Building Operations unit has brought lessons learned through their contacts in commercial building management to help inform how the Division might best use signage, traffic flow and industrial cleaning practices to keep our buildings and everyone in them healthy
- Staff have gained insights at meetings of the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta and the College of Alberta School Superintendents, which they are sharing with the Re-entry Committee
- Partners who provide nutrition, mental health and specialized learning supports have been consulted to review challenges and possible solutions to support students and their families
- Ongoing discussions with the Division's labour group representatives have resulted in innovative approaches to conducting work in our new environment
- Trustees are contributing the lessons learned through provincial organizations such as the Alberta School Boards Association, the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta and the Alberta School Councils' Association and their contacts in other school jurisdictions

Resource development is also taking into consideration the importance of stakeholder voice and lessons learned. New resources being developed to support online, face-to-face and distance learning for use beginning in September 2020 have been designed based on feedback received through two consultation sessions that involved almost 100 teachers from Kindergarten to Grade 12. These new digital/online and print teaching and learning resources are being created collaboratively by Curriculum and Resource Supports, Research and Innovation for Student Learning and classroom teachers to be used for instruction beginning September 2020, and will include opportunities for ongoing field validation and feedback.

Sub-committee leads maintain regular communication with the District Support Team and the Directors and Managing Directors team so that they can learn about information gathered by these groups, as well as provide updates and receive feedback on their committee work. The Re-entry Committee has also benefited from the input and support of the Division Change Team.

In addition to gleaning information from established channels such as SchoolZone, service requests, school-based inquiries, and calls and emails to central departments, the Division is also using more formal research tools to learn from the experiences of staff, students and families. Recently, the Division reached out through two School Re-entry surveys. The survey for school staff, students and families was administered from May 21-28, and garnered 74,027 responses (44,250 from students, 6,231 from school staff, and 23,546 from parents). The survey for non-school staff was administered from June 4-11 and garnered 665 responses.

The provincial government has said it is developing a lessons learned document to be shared with school divisions. We are also closely monitoring return to classes in other provinces for any lessons from that experience. We look forward to incorporating those learnings into our plans.

The Re-entry Committee is scheduled to provide senior leadership with a plan, encompassing all three scenarios, by the end of June. Refinements will then be made in the following weeks to ensure that, no matter what stage Edmonton is in, Edmonton Public Schools will be prepared to welcome back all students and provide them with the supports they need to be successful.

KEY POINTS

- The spread of coronavirus is unpredictable, and the situation can change very quickly. Having to pivot is inevitable; collaboratively planning and drawing on lessons learned to prepare for these pivots minimizes confusion and provides a more consistent and efficient response across the Division.
- Common messaging is critical to decrease misunderstandings or misinterpretations and increase clarity and consistency across the Division.
- Involving those who will be responsible for implementing responses and those who will be affected by responses early in the planning of said responses produces better outcomes.
- Collaboration with other school divisions and sharing of resources and best practices continues to be extremely beneficial.
- The Division will continue to gather lessons learned and use an iterative approach to development when possible, to incorporate lessons and continuously improve.

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