

DATE: June 9, 2020

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Trustee Shelagh Dunn

SUBJECT: Motion re: Request for information from the Ministry of Education – Program Unit Funding (PUF)

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

ISSUE

At the April 28, 2020, public Board meeting, Trustees received a [report](#) requested by Trustee Draper detailing changes to Program Unit Funding (PUF) and the impact on our Division. This report outlined changes in funding received by Edmonton Public Schools, and plans for significant changes to Pre-Kindergarten programming as a result. While Trustees now know how Division programs will be impacted, we do not know if there are any provincial plans to address potential gaps in early intervention as a result of changes to PUF.

BACKGROUND

Researchers and policy-makers have stressed that the timing of early intervention can be crucial for children who need extra supports, as evidence-based early interventions can significantly improve life outcomes for children (Shonkoff, 2010). In addition to providing individual and societal benefits, quality early intervention is also cost-effective over the long term and offers a high return on investment (Heckman, 2008), as later interventions are often less effective because they occur after the optimal ‘developmental window’ (OECD, 2017).

Program Unit Funding through the Ministry of Education in Alberta has historically allowed public school boards and private Early Childhood Services (ECS) operators to offer evidence-based early intervention through a combination of centre-based and family-oriented programming. The co-ordination and funding of these programs through a central ministry is important to the success of the program, as the OECD (2017) has noted that having centre-based and family integrated early childhood education under a designated ministry improves the quality of early intervention.

As a result of recent changes to the funding formula for PUF, Edmonton Public Schools has seen a dramatic reduction in Program Unit Funding, receiving 75 per cent less funding for 2020-2021 than we received for 2019-2020. One of the changes to the funding formula has meant that children in Kindergarten no longer qualify for PUF. Although Kindergarten students may have access to services funded through the new SLS grant, it is not clear that the same amount of funding has been redirected to this grant.

In addition, changes to Pre-Kindergarten funding have meant a significant reduction in the number of children our Division can serve before they enter the school system. Under the current PUF model, our Division serves approximately 1,040 Pre-Kindergarten PUF children. Under the new model, the projected number of Pre-Kindergarten PUF children served will be approximately 600. This is a decrease of approximately 440 children in the coming year who are in a critical developmental window and who will not receive early intervention through Edmonton Public Schools.

The report also details that as a result of the loss in funding, Edmonton Public Schools will need to end the current innovative hub-and-spoke model for provision of early childhood services, resulting in the closure of 22 Pre-Kindergarten satellite locations, an important means of accessing supports for families in or near the communities in which they live.

In addition, funding for family-oriented programming (FOPS) has been removed, which has resulted in the suspension of early intervention programming supports for families, an evidence-based method for providing early supports to children during critical developmental periods.

Our Division has had to quickly respond to dramatic changes in Program Unit Funding and make changes to the provision of Pre-Kindergarten programming. Yet there remain significant concerns about what the loss of these Pre-Kindergarten services for many children in Edmonton will mean when these children enter the school system in Kindergarten or Grade 1, and questions about the level of funding for intervention in Kindergarten. Best practice research predicts that we will have missed a critical developmental window for the provision of early intervention, and that providing these services in Kindergarten or Grade 1 will become less effective and more costly.

Therefore, in order to make wise budgetary decisions, we need more information from the provincial government regarding plans for early intervention in the province. We need to know how many children to expect in Kindergarten or Grade 1 who will not have received early intervention as a result of the changes to PUF. We need to know if there is a plan to fund and deliver early intervention for children who will no longer be able to access PUF programming, either through a new program in the Ministry of Education or another Ministry. If there is no plan for a new delivery model, we need to know if the provincial government will provide additional funding for the more costly interventions and supports which will be required when these children enter our school system.

KEY POINTS

- Next year, 440 fewer Pre-K children will be able to access early intervention through EPSB PUF Pre-Kindergarten programs.
- Those in Pre-K PUF programs will no longer have access to family-oriented programming.
- Research supports centre-based and family-oriented programming which is co-ordinated and funded through a central ministry.
- Waiting to provide intervention once children enter school misses a critical developmental window, is less effective, and costs more for the system, both in terms of the financial impact of service provision and in social costs such as literacy levels and high school completion.
- Boards need more information about provincial plans for early intervention in order to make sound budgetary decisions.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Edmonton Public School Board request more information from the Ministry of Education about plans for early intervention in Alberta, given reductions to Program Unit Funding (PUF), including:

- **Potential changes to the number of children able to access early intervention.**
- **Provincial plans for the provision of early intervention for children who will no longer be able to access early intervention through PUF programs.**

- Plans to address the type and level of intervention needed for students who cannot access early intervention as they enter the school system, in order to maintain long-term student achievement and well-being.

OPTIONS

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

NEXT STEPS

Upon approval of this recommendation, the Board Chair would write to the Minister of Education asking about plans for early intervention in Alberta as outlined in the recommendation, given reductions to Program Unit Funding (PUF).

References:

Heckman, J. J. (2008). The case for investing in disadvantaged young children. In First Focus (Ed.), *Big ideas for children: Investing in our nation's future* (pp. 49-58). Washington, DC: First Focus

OECD (2017), *Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264276116-en>.

Shonkoff, J. P. (2010). Building a New Biodevelopmental Framework to Guide the Future of Early Childhood Policy. *Child Development*, 81, 357-367.

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