

DATE: January 26, 2021

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Annual Update on Operational Efficiencies 2019-2020

ORIGINATOR: Todd Burnstad, Chief Financial Officer

RESOURCE

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REFERENCE: N/A

ISSUE

This information report contains the 2019-2020 update, which is presented to the Board of Trustees annually, on the operational efficiencies undertaken to maximize the amount of education dollars directed to the classroom.

BACKGROUND

For purposes of this discussion, the following information includes: efficiencies that were continued from 2018-2019, new efficiencies that were realized during the 2019-2020 school year, and other efficiencies currently being explored.

The Provision of Educational Facility and Capital Planning Services to School Jurisdictions (continuation from prior years)

Infrastructure provides educational facility and capital planning support to school jurisdictions through contracted services.

- A school viability study was completed on Grassland School for the Aspen View School Division.
- Support was provided to the Northland School Division in doing site readiness analysis studies for school capital projects in both Fort Chipewyan and Conklin, Alberta.
- Ongoing support planning is being provided for a potential replacement school project in Fort Chipewyan.

Development of a Ten-Year Facilities and Three-Year Capital Plan for Northlands School Division is currently underway, in advance of a submission to Alberta Education prior to April 1, 2021.

Collaborative Transportation Service with Edmonton Catholic Schools (continuation from prior years)

Following discussions between Edmonton Public Schools and Edmonton Catholic Schools in the spring of 2018, a shared transportation arrangement was pursued to expand existing shared bus routes and also find efficiencies. While students from each jurisdiction will ride separately, the buses operating these routes will be shared with the costs and efficiencies split between the divisions.

In the 2018-2019 school year, administration implemented 25 bus routes using the shared transportation arrangement, which resulted in approximately \$650,000 in savings for the Division. In the 2019-2020 school year, an additional three routes were added bringing the total number of shared routes to 28.

Bus Pass Reporting (continued from 2018-2019)

The joint initiative between Financial Services began in 2018-2019 to simplify the way in which schools submit their monthly bus pass summary reports and remit their bus pass fees to Financial Services.

Since the initial rollout in May 2019, changes for bus pass fees were implemented in the system for the February 2020 bus fee increases, as well as the 2020-2021 update to the transportation fee schedule.

School Fee Reporting

The *Education Act* came into effect on September 1, 2019, resulting in changes to the school fee regulation that would reduce the level of detailed reporting required by schools and Financial Services. Although the amount of information required to be reported to Alberta Education was reduced, leadership determined that some of this information remains useful from a Division standpoint and is important for public accountability. Former reporting requirements that were of little value were eliminated.

For example, Alberta Education no longer requires a report to the minister of education for every fee charged with an explanation for fee increases greater than five per cent. However, schools continued to report this to ensure that they are mindful when fees increase.

In prior years, schools were required to post (on their websites):

- their current year's projected maximum fees
- the prior year's projected fees
- percentage change
- and the reason for the increase

This made the reports cluttered and difficult for the public to read. Reports posted on school websites now show fee name and amount, as required by the current *School Fee Regulation*.

Through consultation with several school principals, additional tools were posted and made available:

- A fee calculator, modified from a design used at Svend Hansen school, so that schools can calculate school fees in a systematic fashion.
- A comparison of optional fees by general category to provide guidance to principals in setting fees.
- Templates were created to provide clarity around the fees that are being charged.

The due date for reporting expected school fees was moved to June from the previous April due date as it is a less busy time in schools. This was accomplished due to diminished reporting requirements to Alberta Education. The fee reporting tool was also streamlined in response to feedback from schools.

School Generated Funds (SGF) Financial System Review

Financial Services is in the process of reviewing its SGF financial systems and processes with the intention of investigating options that can create efficiencies and respond to school needs. The COVID-19 pandemic, technological advances, and evolving e-commerce solutions have necessitated changes in how financial transactions are conducted in schools.

Fee Management Solution

Edmonton Public Schools is the only major school division that is using a Fees Management System (FMS) that is internally developed and maintained. For the past 20 years, the Division has used FMS which was developed by Division Technology in order to manage school fee collection and receipting. The system has served the Division well with training and support provided by Division Technology and as it is an internally developed system, there are no external costs associated with its use.

The increase in the number of fees and types of fees being charged in schools, the provincial school fee regulations, fee refunds and reliance on ecommerce has necessitated the consideration of using a professionally designed fee solution. Investing in a commercially developed solution will save time and work at school level while increasing the potential for online fundraising, donations, and sales.

A request for information (RFI) was issued in August 2020. Out of the five responses received, three of the systems can potentially be used to increase efficiency in our schools. However, conversion is not feasible for the 2021-2022 school year as originally conceived due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Financial Services will draft a business plan in early 2021 to discuss possible next steps.

Banking

Currently, each school is responsible for its own bank accounts and treasury function. They have complete autonomy in managing their bank account within the restrictions of Financial Services policies and practices. This has been identified as a risk by our external auditors as internal control safeguards can be circumvented, resulting in fraud or theft that can go undetected until the next internal audit.

Furthermore, current systems rely heavily on manual cheques in order to ensure that all disbursements from the bank account are reviewed and approved by two members of each school staff. Cheques are being used less by businesses and individuals in favor of electronic transfers. Furthermore, the increased number of cheques generated at school level as a result of school fee refunds has resulted in more fraudulent transactions occurring in the schools from altered or counterfeit cheques.

In order to mitigate some of the banking risks that currently exist, we are investigating banking options that would allow the schools to continue having an independent bank account which would fall under a Division master bank account. With the help from one of our schools, the plan is to test this type of banking platform in February 2021. The results of this test will help inform our Division banking requirements as our current agreement with Scotia Bank expires on August 31, 2021.

School Accounting

Schools currently use QuickBooks Online (QBO), an easy-to-use accounting system that does not require an in-depth knowledge of accounting. However, this does involve keeping track of school generated funds (maintained by schools) and Division funds (maintained by Financial Services) on two different systems with a lot of manual entry into QBO.

This could potentially be the most complicated process to change as replacing or merging the school accounting program may have a significant impact on how work processes are managed as well as staffing levels. Administration will continue to review this potential initiative to determine if any efficiencies can be achieved.

Enhancements to SchoolZone (continued from 2018-2019)

Enhancements to SchoolZone were added to the pre-enrolment selection for the 2020-2021 school year to assist schools in meeting the Alberta Education regulation that requires a parent to annually confirm, in writing, their child's enrolment. This reduced staff workload with the Student Information Correction Form process, starting in the 2020-2021 school year.

The Provision of Instructional Support Services to Alberta Education, School Jurisdictions and Organizations

Several departments within the Division provide supports to Alberta Education, school divisions and outside organizations, either through partnership agreements, or informal collaboration, enabling access to professional learning services and events or contracted services. Examples include:

- In response to the pandemic the Resource Hub at Edmonton Public Schools was launched ahead of schedule. As of August 31 2020, 171 teaching and learning resources had been posted; the Hub received over 52,000 visits and approximately 11,500 downloaded resources from over 50 countries around the world. The ready availability of these resources allows other school divisions to access our materials easily without having to go through Division staff, saving a considerable amount of time that would have been spent fielding these queries.
- Scope and Sequence documents that show the distribution of all outcomes from the program of studies in a monthly format were developed and provided to all Division schools from Kindergarten to Grade 9 along with many school authorities across the province. To date, 38 Alberta school authorities have been provided with Scopes and Sequences. These documents support efficiencies in teacher planning time as well as increased efficiency in the process to support students transitioning between in person and at home learning.
- Teacher Support Packs, designed to support teaching and learning in face-to-face, online and at-home learning contexts were developed for Kindergarten to Grade 9. To date, 38 Alberta school authorities have been provided with Teacher Support Packs. Development of these packs will continue through 2020-2021, with new packs released every week. These resources support efficiencies in teacher planning time, support continuity of learning for students transitioning between in person and at home learning and support reduced teacher planning time for supply teachers.
- In response to the pandemic, in partnership with Alberta Metro School Boards, resources were developed to support the implementation of mental health strategies for school re-entry which included learning activities, videos, tips sheets and a principal toolkit. This collaboration resulted in efficiencies in provincial education funds as well as staff time.

KEY POINTS

As noted above, Edmonton Public Schools continues to collaborate with other school divisions, organizations and working committees. This collaboration not only maximizes provincial education funds, but also creates efficiencies resulting in cost and time savings and the ability to provide supports and services for students across Alberta.

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