

**DATE:** October 6, 2020

**TO:** Board of Trustees

**FROM:** Trustee Shelagh Dunn

**SUBJECT:** Motion re: Suspension of Diploma Exams and Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) for the 2020-2021 School Year

**RESOURCE STAFF:** Karen Mills

**REFERENCE:** [Trustees' Handbook – Section 5.2.2 – Notices of Motion](#)

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## ISSUE

The global pandemic has resulted in a world-wide disruption to the delivery of education. On March 15, 2020, the provincial government cancelled all school classes indefinitely, and students at Edmonton Public schools were moved to emergency remote learning online for the remainder of the school year. Diploma exams and Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) were cancelled. On July 21, 2020, the provincial government announced the [provincial re-entry plan](#) with students resuming in-person classes in the fall under Scenario 1 (near normal with health measures), including measures such as increased cleaning, sanitizing, hygiene and grouping students into cohorts. Edmonton Public Schools released our [re-entry strategy](#) on August 4, 2020, and the province provided an [updated provincial re-entry plan](#) on August 27, 2020, with additional masking requirements.

The Division has moved to a quarterly system for the 2020-2021 school year, allowing families to choose between in-person and online classes at four points within the school year, with just under 30 per cent of students enrolled in online classes for the first quarter. Since beginning the school year, many schools across the province have been impacted by cases of COVID, requiring thousands of students and teachers to self-isolate for periods of up to 14 days at a time.

Notice of motion was served during the September 22, 2020, Board meeting.

## BACKGROUND

### **Stress and Mental Health:**

The impact of the pandemic on everyday life has proven to be stressful for many. As we get used to life during a pandemic, many may start to believe that it is possible to implement health measures and return to a sense of normal. However, the description of school as near-normal with health measures may belie the day-to-day stress and impact of the pandemic. It has become very clear that the 2020-2021 school year is not a normal school year, and that this will have a clear and direct impact on student and staff stress and mental health.

Students have entered school under more environmental stress due to the impact of the pandemic on families and societies. [Research](#)<sup>1</sup> on the impact of the pandemic on families with children has shown a disruption in routine, child-care, and the economic impact of the pandemic on issues such as food insecurity, and that this has added to worsening mental health in both parents and children. Changes in school environments will likely add to potential stress. For instance, a recent [survey](#) by the ATA found a

large majority of teachers reported fatigue, stress and anxiety in the first two weeks of September.

In a school year with incredible structural changes to the way learning is delivered, evidence that students are likely entering school with additional stress and mental health concerns due to the impact of the pandemic, and a large degree of anxiety and uncertainty for students, families and staff, it is important to prioritize well-being as we make decisions for the year ahead. At the outset of the pandemic, when transitioning to emergency remote learning, the provincial and Division responses prioritized student well-being above achievement. As the global pandemic continues to significantly disrupt everyday life and the school environment, I believe that we need to continue to attend to and prioritize mental health and well-being.

**Changes to Learning Environment:**

Re-opening schools during the pandemic has required many necessary health measures and changes to educational delivery. This has brought about significant and unprecedented changes to learning environments that can be expected to impact student learning and mental health. Some of these changes include:

- A very significant number of students learning online, with the possibility of students moving between in-person and online learning at multiple points throughout the year.
- Moving to a quarter model for high school classes.
- Adapting learning delivery to learn at the same time during the school year, in the event schools need to switch to Scenario 2 or 3.
- Detailed health measures which have significantly changed aspects of social and academic school environments. These include masking, hygiene protocols, distancing requirements, seating charts, additional cleaning, separating students into cohorts, and limiting the number of teachers interacting with a class of students.
- Identification of cases and outbreaks in schools. This has meant large number of students and staff self-isolating and learning/working at home, and the potential that the students remaining at school are taught by teachers they are unfamiliar with for extended periods.
- The potential that students and teachers miss more instructional time than usual due to the necessary precaution of staying at home when ill.
- Potential impacts to learning and mental health as a result of months of emergency remote learning during the 2019-2020 school year.

**Usefulness and Feasibility of Diploma Exams and PATs:**

Since Scenario 1 lists schools as opening near normal, it is understandable to wish to continue with plans for provincial standardized testing. However, the 2020-2021 school year is nowhere near a normal year, and this calls into question the practicality and usefulness of provincial standardized tests this year.

It is not clear if diploma exams will offer a meaningful measure of student achievement amongst the uncertainty and disruption of the current school year. In fact, students may have their learning impacted by additional stress, an online learning environment, isolation requirements and changes in teaching staff. Because course materials are condensed as part of the quarter system, missed instructional time may have significant impacts on students. In this case, it is possible that teacher awarded marks will better capture a student's true ability and likelihood to succeed in post-secondary studies, as assessments are conducted multiple times throughout the quarter and may provide a better prediction of student learning and likelihood for success in post-secondary studies.

It is also not clear that data produced by Provincial Achievement Tests will provide a meaningful picture

of student achievement this year. Because of the unprecedented changes listed above, standardized tests will not be capturing information that will be readily comparable to previous years. While the tests may remain reliable, the validity of PATs may not be maintained given these large-scale and multi-factored changes. This makes results more difficult to interpret and compare and can limit the usefulness of this data for decision-making. In addition, the pandemic is likely to impact different areas of the province in different ways, making comparisons of results on these tests difficult across the province, and providing limited value to the province this year.

There remain questions about the practicality and safety of conducting in-person diploma exams and PATs for students who are learning online, or the potential for offering online versions of standardized test for students unable to attend in person due to health conditions and/or self-isolation. But apart from questions of feasibility, the pandemic has also highlighted an increasing lack of equity in access to choice and school environment. Some families do not have the economic means to choose online learning for their children, even though they may prefer or need this choice due to underlying health conditions. This may place greater stress upon these families. Those who are able to choose online learning may not have equal access to the same type of learning space, technology or supports and these inequities may be compounded by the condensed nature of high school courses in a quarter system. In addition, it is not known whether changes such as condensed high school courses and online learning will have differential impacts on English Language Learners, students with learning disabilities, and/or students requiring specialized supports. It is unclear how these additional gaps in equity would be accounted for in provincial exams this school year.

#### **Weighing Costs/Benefits:**

In an ideal environment, standardized provincial testing would cause little or at least manageable stress to students and the staff preparing them to write these exams. However, we know that for many students, diploma exams and PATs can cause additional stress. When added to the significant impact of the pandemic on mental health and well-being, the unprecedented changes in the delivery of instruction and school environments, and the continued stress of uncertainty, we must weigh the benefits of diploma exams and PATs against the costs to student, staff and system well-being. Given that the use of the results of these provincial tests may be significantly limited this year, it is possible to continue the suspension of provincial testing this school year in order to prioritize student and staff mental health and focus time and resources on improving student learning, connection and well-being.

#### **RELATED FACTS**

- During the disruption caused by the 2013 flood in Calgary, diploma exams were made optional for all students in Calgary at the time.
- During the 2016 disruption to learning for students impacted by the Fort McMurray fires, diploma exams were made optional for impacted students, with the teacher-awarded mark serving as a final grade for those opting out.
- With the cancellation of classes this spring and disruption to learning for all students province-wide, the province cancelled remaining diploma exams and PATs for 2019-2020.
- The disruptions to learning due to unprecedented health measures, unexpected self-isolation, changes between online and in-person learning and changes to instructional delivery made necessary by the uncertainties of the pandemic have placed great change and stress upon the education system in Alberta and will impact the students and staff within this system. Diploma exams and PATs tend to create stress for students and staff and should not be a priority concern given the multitude of stressors already present for students and staff in the 2020-2021 school year.
- The results of diploma exams and PATs will not be readily comparable to previous years, and

differences in the results will likely be hard to pinpoint because of the multitude of significant changes in learning environments due to the pandemic. The pandemic will likely impact different areas of the province in different ways, making results on these exams difficult to compare across Alberta.

### RECOMMENDATION

**Given the systemic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Board of Trustees advocate to the provincial government to suspend diploma exams and Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) across the province during the 2020-2021 school year.**

### OPTIONS

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

### CONSIDERATIONS and ANALYSIS

The suspension of diploma exams and PATs will result in a loss of data that the Board has relied upon for accountability and strategic decision-making through our Strategic Plan Update Reports and Results Review process. However, the use of any data from diploma exams and PATs to inform decisions will be greatly limited given the significant and multi-factored disruptions to the current school year and the impact of the suspension of classes at the end of the 2019-2020 school year. It is possible that some students may wish to write diploma exams, and the Board may consider advocating for the province to make diploma exams optional to students. However, this may result in additional system-level stress to organize and deliver and may make it more difficult for post-secondary institutions to interpret final grades across the province. Given the stresses of current unprecedented disruptions on students and staff, and the limited usefulness of the data, advocacy for suspension of diploma exams and PATs for the 2020-2021 school year across the province is recommended.

### NEXT STEPS

Upon approval of this recommendation, the Board Chair would send a letter to the Minister of Education detailing the disruptions caused by the impact of the pandemic and advocating for the suspension of diploma exams and Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) for the 2020-2021 school year. This letter would be copied to the Alberta School Boards Association and the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta.

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<sup>i</sup> Patrick, S.W., Henkhaus, L. E., Zickafoose, J. S., Lovell, K., Halvorson, A., Loch, S., Letterie, M. & Davis, M. M. (2020, September). Well-being of parents and children during the COVID-19 pandemic: A national survey. *Pediatrics*, 146(3). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-016824>