

DATE: September 10, 2024

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Trustee Trisha Estabrooks, Advocacy Committee
Trustee Julie Kusiek, Advocacy Committee
Trustee Marsha Nelson, Chair, Advocacy Committee
Trustee Sherri O’Keefe, Advocacy Committee

SUBJECT: Advocacy Committee 2023-2024 Work Plan Summary

RESOURCE STAFF: Karen Mills

REFERENCE [Trustees’ Handbook](#), Section 7.5 - Advocacy Committee

ISSUE

The Advocacy Committee is responsible for developing and presenting to the Board of Trustees an annual work plan. This report summarizes the committee’s accomplishments over this school year.

BACKGROUND

The Advocacy Committee was affirmed on June 23, 2020. The Committee Terms of Reference were finalized on October 21, 2020. The Advocacy Committee is an ad hoc committee of the Board and is responsible for assisting the Board of Trustees in developing, carrying out, and evaluating advocacy initiatives for building positive intergovernmental and public relations as a way of furthering Division priorities and the Board’s Strategic Plan with families, students and community.

CURRENT SITUATION

Rather than create a new work plan, the Advocacy Committee continued the work set out in the 2022-2023 work plan (see Attachment I), keeping mental health, funding and infrastructure as the key areas of focus. Advocacy was a topic of discussion at the Board’s fall planning meeting in early September. Over the summer of 2023, MLA Nicolaides was appointed as the Education Minister and the Premier provided mandate letters to all Ministries. Trustees reviewed the mandate letters and identified the ties to Education, connections to work already happening in the Division and opportunities for collaboration.

The Board continued their advocacy discussion at a session on September 29. At this session, Trustees discussed the various audiences they wished to reach and noted that, due to different levels of existing knowledge, different information was needed by different audiences. Trustees agreed on a desire to build an advocacy campaign where messages for different audiences complemented each other and were timed for maximum impact. To design such a campaign, they felt that it would be best to contract outside expertise.

The Advocacy Committee undertook a Request for Information (RFI) process to collect information about what was available in the marketplace that could meet the Board’s service requirements. The RFI was

issued on December 18, 2023 and closed on January 19, 2024. Six firms responded, the majority of which had the skills and experience being sought.

In February, the committee developed an information sheet and key messages for Trustees to share regarding the Division's space crunch and need for new schools and funding to support aging schools. The materials were used to raise awareness prior to the provincial government's Budget 2024.

At the March 5 Caucus Committee meeting, the Advocacy Committee brought forward a recommendation to conduct a Request for Proposal process for an external consultant to assist in the development of a plan to enhance advocacy efforts and relationship building. Through discussion at the meeting, however, Trustees identified that the progress in meeting with government officials, increased funding pressures and the effectiveness of in-house developed communications supports diminished the desire for external expertise. Rather than proceed with a Request for Proposal, they agreed to have a facilitated conversation to define next steps.

On April 23, an external facilitator guided Trustees in a conversation to review existing materials, barriers to communication, and desired outcomes. Through the conversation, Trustees decided to develop resources in-house for factual communications material to raise awareness regarding key issues. The Board also decided to develop an advocacy strategy internally and reassess their support for advocacy activities in three to six months.

KEY POINTS

- The Advocacy Committee conducted a Request for Information process to collect information about what was available in the marketplace that could meet the Board's advocacy and communications requirements.
- Through further discussion, the Board decided to produce a strategy and materials in house rather than contracting an external consultant.
- The committee produced an infrastructure information sheet and key messages for Trustees' use prior to the province's Budget 2024.

ATTACHMENTS and APPENDICES

ATTACHMENT I Budget Watch 2024: Infrastructure information sheet

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Advocacy Committee 2022-2023 Work Plan

KEY AREAS OF FOCUS

At the Advocacy Committee's meeting on October 26, 2022, they confirmed three key areas of focus for advocacy efforts.

1. Mental Health

Priority 3 of the Strategic Plan is to promote a comprehensive approach to student and staff well-being and mental health. Students need good mental health to fully engage in learning and staff need good mental health to be able to fully support students. It is also important to remember that education dollars need to be spent on education, not healthcare, and that teachers are not healthcare professionals. Therefore, advocacy to provide for sustained, funded, accessible mental health care for staff and students in our schools is critical. Recommendations from the [Child and Youth Well-being Report](#) will be important touchstones in this work.

2. Space Needs

Growing enrolment in Edmonton Public Schools and a lack of capital announcements means the Division is running out of space for students, particularly in new neighbourhoods. Currently, the overall average utilization rate of the Division is at 80 per cent and estimated to increase this school year, with many individual schools already well past that rate. When schools hit the 85 percent utilization rate, they retain little flexibility to organize students for instruction. The lack of space is creating challenges for providing choice and is limiting the Division's ability to provide diverse learning environments. The lack of space is directly impacting families and students and leading to long bus rides, fragmented communities and crowded schools. Advocacy on this topic aligns with Strategic Plan Priority 1: Build on outstanding learning opportunities for all students.

3. Funding

The Division requires adequate, sustainable and predictable funding to ensure accessible and equitable public education for every child. This aligns with Strategic Plan Priority 1: Build on outstanding learning opportunities for all students. Specific areas of advocacy may include impacts of the weighted moving average, infrastructure and transportation funding, and funding for students requiring specialized supports.

Each topic was identified for advocacy at the Trustee off-site meeting in September, has been highlighted as an area of need in reports from administration, and aligns with the Strategic Plan.

Topics that aligned with Priority 2 of the Strategic Plan - Advance action towards anti-racism and reconciliation - were discussed by the committee. However, committee members decided that, because a lot of work aligned with this Priority is already underway and more is already planned for this year, it did not need to be one of the Advocacy Committee's areas of focus. Committee members readily agreed that the committee will be ready to offer advocacy support for any of the Priority 2 work that is being conducted, should it be needed.

The committee decided that while all the areas of focus have short-term (pre-provincial election) actions and longer-term relevance, they will focus their attention this year on pre-election initiatives. The

committee's work will have a tone and overarching goal to collaborate and build a stronger relationship with the provincial government.

The Advocacy Committee will:

- Develop an advocacy calendar to identify key issues, events, and synergies between existing communication and stakeholder engagement efforts and the key areas of focus, to capitalize on opportunities for advocating while using resources efficiently and consolidating materials for stakeholders.
- Identify potential partnerships that could amplify the Board's advocacy efforts.
- Develop key messages, along with other communications materials as needed, including the materials developed by the previous Advocacy committee, for each area of focus and identify target audiences and desired outcomes for all advocacy efforts. One item of focus will be the development of "Questions to Ask Candidates", along with messaging about what Edmonton Public Schools needs and advocacy efforts already made by the Board. The target for the completion of these materials is the end of February 2023.
- Suggest approaches and draft responses for emerging issues on which the Board wishes to advocate.
- Respond on an as-needed basis to emerging issues.

REQUESTED RESOURCES

- Staff to assist in the development of key messages. The Committee will work with the Director Board and Superintendent Relations to define the scope of work and required resources.
- If funds are required, the Committee will present a project plan and budget for the Board's approval prior to undertaking work in this area.

What Edmonton Public School Board Trustees are Watching for in the Provincial Budget

Funding needed for infrastructure

We are one of the fastest growing school divisions in Alberta, growing by about 5,000 students annually. That’s enough students to fill two new high schools each year! Unfortunately, provincial funding of new school construction is not keeping pace with our enrolment growth.

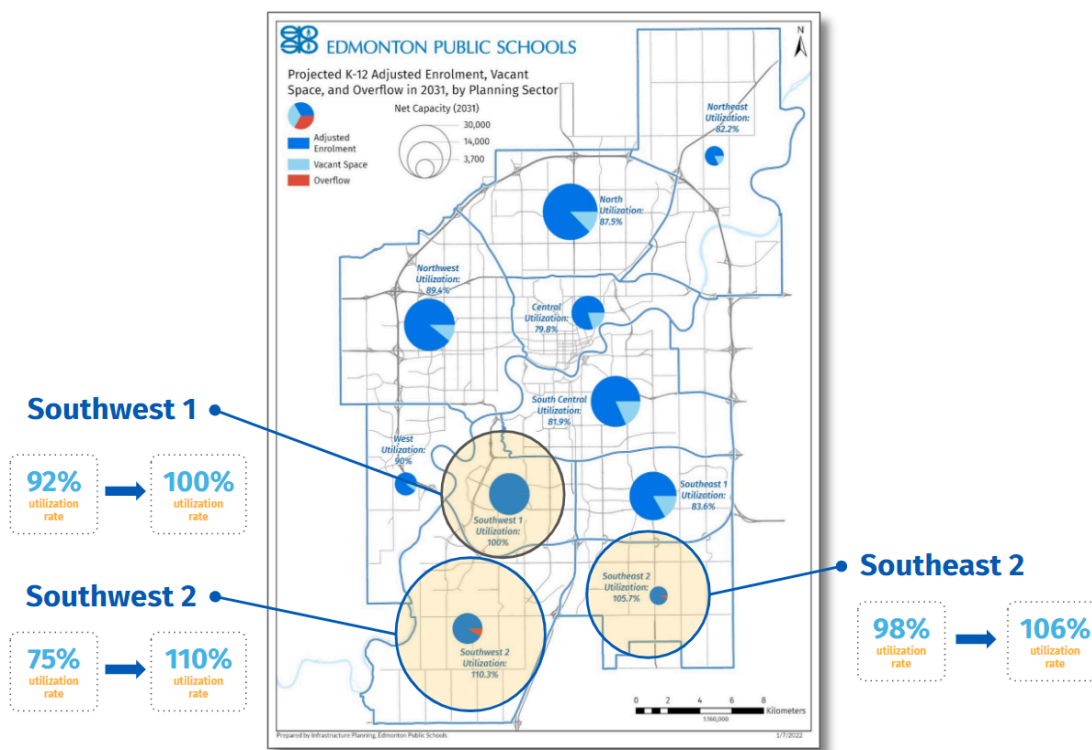
We have over 115,000 students in 215 schools. We believe every one of them deserves a great school building, no matter where they live. As shown in our [capital plan](#), we need new schools for our growing student population and funding to support our older schools.

The Province funds new school construction, decides when and where schools are built and controls how much money we get to repair our older buildings. In Budget 2021-22, EPSB received no new school funding and in Budget 2022-2023 received construction funding only for one K-9 school; our families are feeling the impacts.

Our schools are FULL

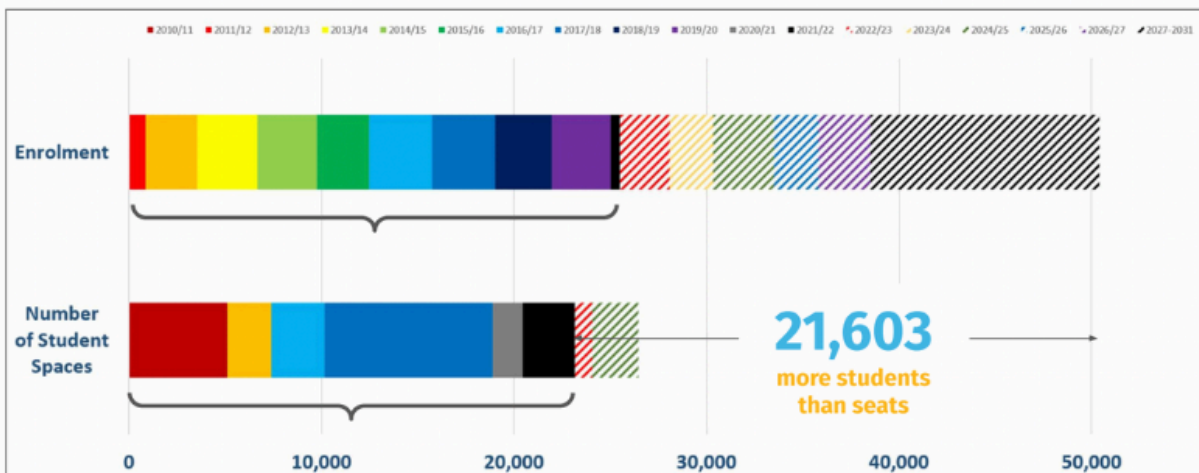
Division-wide, our schools are averaging 82 per cent utilization. This means that all classrooms are full except for one or two where staff can work with individual or small groups of students as needed. At 90 per cent utilization, that “extra” classroom space is generally no longer available. At 100 per cent utilization, art rooms, music rooms and learning commons are used for regular classroom space and can no longer be used for their intended purpose. In other words, with our Division at 80 per cent, we are FULL.

Space utilization by sector: 2031 projection

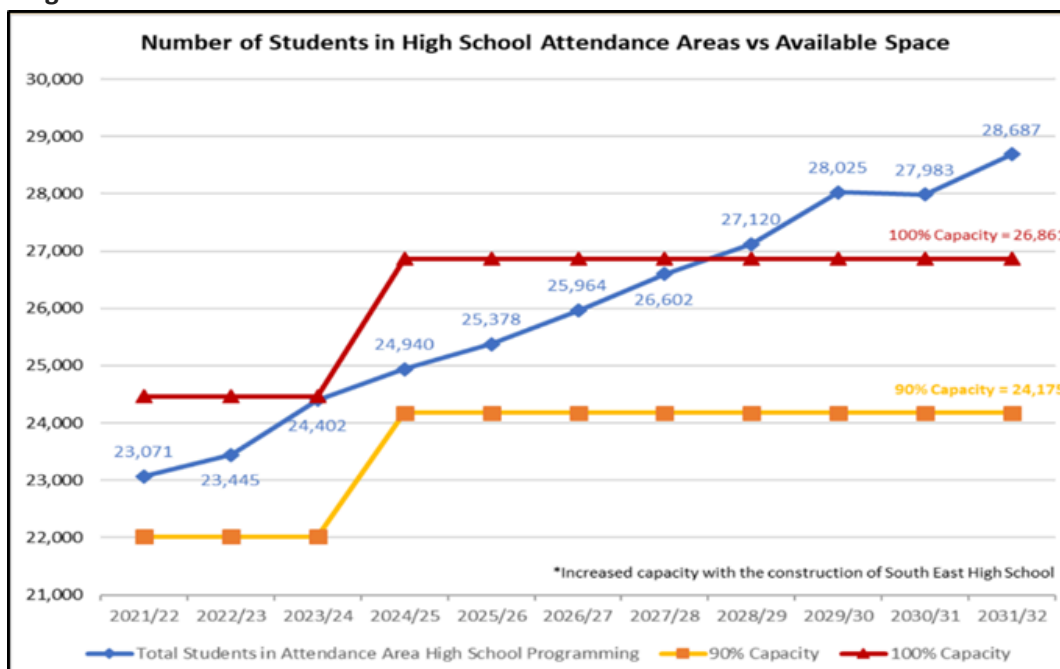


The Division’s most acute need is high school space; we will be out of high school capacity in 2027. This is despite the new spaces at Dr. Anne Anderson School (1900 spaces opened in September 2021) and the new Elder Dr. Francis Whiskeyjack high school opening September 2024 in The Meadows (2400 spaces). We also already have seven schools that have gone to a lottery system because they aren’t able to accommodate all the students in their immediate vicinity. This isn’t ideal for anyone.

EPSB enrolment vs capacity growth - 2010 to 2031



Space demands: high school



[Capacity change in 2024/25 reflects the opening of the high school in The Meadows.]

Without new schools on the horizon, it’s critical to maintain our current schools. However, over half of our schools are more than 50 years old. It would cost about \$900 million to modernize all our buildings, and that would only repair them without significantly improving their layouts to match learning environments that newer schools provide. Right now, we have to take approximately \$28 million out of classrooms each year to run our buildings because we don’t get enough operating funds from the Province.

We believe schools are the hearts of our communities, and we want to keep that heartbeat healthy. We’ll be watching the Provincial budget for help with that.

Resources:

[Three-Year Capital Plan 2024-2027](#)

[Ten-Year Facilities Plan 2023-2032](#)

[Student Accommodation Plan 2023-2024](#)