

February 18, 2021

Honourable Adriana LaGrange  
Minister of Education  
204 Legislature Building  
10800 – 97 Avenue  
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister LaGrange,

### **Data supports robust funding for early childhood programming**

Last June, we shared our concerns with you about the reduction to Program Unit Funding (PUF) and the detrimental impacts it will have on children, their families and our education system. I have attached that letter for your convenience.

The Board of Trustees recently received new data that confirms our concerns are well founded and compels us to renew our call to you to restore PUF funding to at least the equivalent per-student amount as 2018 levels. We want to share this data with you.

One of our Board's Strategic Plan goals is *An Excellent Start to Learning*. As part of our public assurance practices, our Board regularly receives Strategic Plan Update Reports. At our February 9 public Board meeting, we received a report on our Early Years programming.

There is abundant research detailing the many positive impacts of early childhood education, particularly for children with complex needs. Pre-Kindergarten programming sets our most vulnerable children up for success at an early age. What is striking about the report we received is how clearly evidence shows the positive impact of the Division's early years programming.

There is a predictable pattern demonstrating that children who participated in a Division Pre-Kindergarten program achieved a stronger overall level of readiness for Grade 1 on the spring Early Years Evaluation - Teacher Assessment (EYE-TA) of their Kindergarten year than their peers who did not participate in a Division Pre-Kindergarten program.

Based on our EYE-TA data, there is evidence to indicate that the Division's efforts in support of Pre-Kindergarten programming from 2014-2015 to 2018-2019 had a positive impact towards improving children's readiness for Grade 1. The EYE-TA data supports the importance of early intervention and demonstrates the impact the Division can have when programming for children prior to Grade 1.

What is also striking in the report is the confirmation that 900 fewer children are able to access our programming this year because of the changes to PUF.

The restricted age of access and introduction of a base funding amount for half-time programs has meant that programming is accessible to fewer children, making it much more challenging, if not impossible, for them to receive the early intervention they need. It also means less support for families, due to the changes in funding that no longer allow for family-oriented programming sessions, resulting in even less support for these very vulnerable children.

The early years are a critical time in a child's development. There is no chance to have the same impact as can be had in Pre-Kindergarten later in a child's learning journey.

It is difficult to comprehend why resources are being reduced for our most vulnerable children at a time where the evidence clearly concludes the effectiveness of the support that we are able to provide.

- The rapid growth and transformation possible during a young child's brain development cannot be replicated as the child ages.
- Children who reach developmental milestones, and are therefore ready to enter Grade 1, do not require the intensive intervention supports throughout their elementary, junior high and high school education.
- Our Division's Pre-Kindergarten programming resulted in the greatest growth in children's readiness for Grade 1.
- Investment in early years programming results in significant savings down the road. As illustrated on page 9 of the report, the significant gains made by 117 children in just one year of Pre-Kindergarten with the Division resulted in them no longer requiring a special education code which translates into \$2 million dollars which could be redirected to other students.

School boards across the province agree that the significant funding cuts to PUF are detrimental to children, as evidenced by their passing of the following motion at the Fall General Meeting of the Alberta School Boards Association:

*BE IT RESOLVED THAT, Alberta Education ensure that all students with mild/moderate and severe disabilities/delays who require specialized early intervention provided by program unit funding are able to receive it, and that funding of the PUF program be restored to the equivalent per-student amount as 2018 levels, including Family Oriented Supports, allowing ECS providers to offer fully funded half-day programming, and that program funding be extended from two years to three years to include supports for Kindergarten.*

Adequate PUF funding makes economic and moral sense. The many benefits of robust early years programming, and the great costs – both financial and social – to all of society when

vulnerable students and their families can't access it are significant. Therefore, our Board asks that PUF funding be restored in the 2021-2022 Education budget to at least the equivalent of the 2018 per-student amount for both Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten.

Sincerely,



Trisha Estabrooks  
Board Chair

KM/mj

Attachments:

1. Strategic Plan Update: Early Years
2. June 1, 2020, letter re: Request to reconsider Program Unit Funding model

c: Hon. Rebecca Schulz, Minister of Children's Services  
Hon. Rajan Sawhney, Minister Community and Social Services  
Hon. Travis Toews, President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance  
Board Chairs of the Alberta Public, Separate and Francophone School Divisions  
Lorrie, Jess, President, Alberta School Boards Association  
Cathy Hogg, President, Public School Boards' Association of Alberta