



## **SCHOOL ACT Review**

**The Board of Trustees of Wild Rose School Division respectfully submits the following comments for consideration:**

- 1. All Alberta children have a superseding right of access to the ECS – 12 public education system which is not dependent on where they reside.**

Overall, we are supportive of this foundational theme, especially as it speaks to the right of ALL children to access a system spanning ECS-12. There are, however, a number of factors which need to be kept in mind when considering such a theme. Some of these are outlined below.

Students are ready to enter the public education system and to maximize their potential for success in the system at varying ages. Accordingly, utilizing only age as the determinant for entry into the system can act counter to the best interests of many of Alberta's children. Consideration ought to be given to the *readiness* of children to enter and be successful in the system in addition to age. Any system that is built around a "cut-off date" (e.g., December 31<sup>st</sup>) has a built-in bias toward favouring students born closer to said date (e.g., January 2<sup>nd</sup> as opposed to September 23<sup>rd</sup>) as they are more likely to be more developmentally ready to be successful in the system.

Given the apparent lack of (cognitive, academic, and social) readiness of a growing number of students to enter and be successful in grade one, serious consideration ought to be given to mandatory ECS programming to help ensure that all students are ready to maximally benefit from public education. These programs should be play-based and aimed at providing children with experiences based on current brain research. One of the problems associated with such programming, especially in rural areas, would be travel time to access such programs, especially if they are located only in larger centres. Hence, in the interests of equity, additional consideration may have to be given to ensuring the means to provide programming more locally.

In a truly public education system, access to publicly funded K-12 programming should not be impacted by where a student resides. It is a requirement of such a system to ensure that all students have access to legitimate forms of programming. Understandably, this will require some rethinking of the funding formula to support such an approach as well as to the issue of what constitutes "mandatory" elements of a basic education.

All publicly funded systems should be required to accept and provide programming for all students making application to attend their schools. Schools which are, in some way, exclusive, run counter to the concept of public education and it should be reconsidered whether or not they are truly "public" in nature.

It is understood that some students require longer being successful in completing the programming needed to pursue their lives after gr. 12. Currently, the School Act provides only a limited window for this and it is a window that does not serve well the needs of students who make missteps along the way. In the interests of establishing a system built on success rather than on timelines, this needs to be reconsidered.

**2. Students should be able to access instruction at any time, any place, and at their own pace.**

The emphasis on *learning* rather than on learning at a particular time and in a particular place recognizes that the twenty-first century is a very different world, one that demands, and can provide, different answers. As such, this is an appropriate theme to consider. Realizing it, though, will demand a *complete* rethinking and restructuring of the education system. To continue to provide funding supports and to maintain accountability expectations aligned to an outdated system while expecting boards to provide instructional access within a differently conceptualized framework is unlikely to be conducive to success.

Emerging technologies offer unprecedented opportunities to broaden and deepen the learning experience. In doing so, though, it is useful to be mindful of the fact that learning that has some structure to it is more beneficial than learning which is more haphazard in nature. Accordingly, it will be necessary to ensure that such structures are in place so that learning occurs in a focussed manner. It is necessary to remember that true learning is seldom an individual affair—it is usually contextual and is often built within a framework of interactions and understandings with others. Thus, it will be necessary to ensure that structures are in place to ensure these interactions can occur. Further, if it is the purpose of a public education system to ensure that students have the necessary skills and understandings to become positive and productive citizens, it is necessary to provide opportunities for students to learn the skills needed to get along with others. It is very difficult to do this digitally (although, learning how to behave properly in the digital world is important as well). Students will require opportunities to develop the skills of face-to-face interactions in addition to the opportunity to interact with ideas.

With the foregoing cautions in mind though, the opportunity exists for students to play with ideas and to explore learning opportunities that are not tied to particular places and times and students should be given the opportunities and encouragement to utilize them. This will require teachers to think much more broadly about what constitutes a learning experience than has hitherto been the case. Such a step may require teachers to unlearn decades of existing practice and learn new approaches. A transition of this nature does not occur overnight and will require significant support.

**3. Student success is the primary goal of the education system and government has a responsibility to provide the structure and supports to maximize it.**

The success of all students should be the primary aim of all levels of the public schools system. How we answer the questions of what is success and how will we know it has been achieved, though, is



fundamental to any such discussion. In the case of public education, it would seem that success means far more than merely academic success however, unfortunately, little formal attention is given to the other types of success. This is something that needs to change.

Provincial exams are a reasonably good measure of the degree to which curricular objectives are being taught effectively in the system. However, they are not the only means and an over-emphasis on them has resulted in distortions of the system. The unfortunate misuse of exam results has resulted in a narrowing of the learning experience for the majority of students in the province, both in terms of breadth of learning and mode of instruction. Not all desirable outcomes can be measured by paper and pencil tests. This is something that needs to be addressed. Fortunately, the importance of classroom assessments in learning is being realized and, as it improves, should be given increasing weight in the assessment of learning. Further, in order to help shift the focus to deep learning rather than learning for testing, it would be advisable to reduce (or eliminate) the “weight” given to diploma exam results, especially as they rely almost exclusively on one type of question presentation and response, an approach that disadvantages too many students.

It is questionable as to whether or not *choice* is an essential, or even an important factor in student success, at least as it is currently understood. As it is currently realized in the system, it may have the impact of fracturing the focus on essential learnings by focussing instead on other elements. Further, it results in what is effectively a two-tiered system—in larger urban centres it is possible to offer greater choice than is the case in rural areas. If choice is truly an important feature, it should be equally available to all. That said, choice in terms of the means of learning and the demonstration of learning is a very desirable feature and does, in fact, lead to improved learning for all.

Currently, attendance is compulsory for ages 6-16 years. There are at least two areas of difficulty with this. First, is the means by which such a requirement is enforced. The approaches outlined in the current Act are largely ineffective. Hence, consideration must be given to ensuring the criterion of mandatory attendance will be addressed in the future. Another consideration is the current age of potentially leaving the system. It is not possible for the majority of students to complete their programs by the age of sixteen. If successful program completion is a goal of the system, this must be re-examined.

The provision of support services for students in need is currently an area of need for significant improvement. Including provisions to facilitate increased collaboration with other agencies would be a important step in the right direction. Additionally, the system would benefit from an improved means of delivering all specialized health services, especially in the rural areas where there is often no means to deliver the expected services with the result that they often go unaddressed. It may be more effective to allocate the money directly to school districts that can then contract directly with agencies for the delivery of services. Further, there is a growing awareness of the need for increased levels of counselling support for students in the system. This is largely unrecognized in the funding formulae. While it is debatable as to whether or not mental health counselling is truly the responsibility of the education system, the fact remains that, given the resources, the education



system can be an effective vehicle for the delivery of such services which currently fail to get to large numbers of students requiring them.

**4. The connection of locally elected school authorities to their communities is an important element of our public education system. Government has a responsibility to support maximizing trustee and board competence, and to set provincial standards for the roles and responsibilities of boards.**

With up to 60% of board members across the province having been acclaimed into their positions, one has to wonder why. It may be that, for the most part, local communities are satisfied with the way in which education is being delivered to their children and, therefore, do not see a need to engage the system. Another possibility is that local communities perceive boards to be largely ineffective bodies with most of the important decisions affecting education being made elsewhere. In any event, if boards are truly to be able to respond to the needs and wishes of local communities, they must have increased authority to make such decisions returned to them. In the absence of such authority, maximizing competence and setting standards are little more than efforts in window-dressing.

The current provisions providing students and parents an avenue of appeal appears to be functioning in a fairly effective manner. It would be desirable for boards to have a similar avenue of appeal in the event that provincial decisions adversely affect the potential of a board to deliver the expected services to the local community.

**5. There must be balance between local autonomy and fiscal responsibility.**

Current approaches to fiscal management negatively impact on the ability of local boards to address perceived facility needs in a timely manner. Further, decisions regarding facility design are impacted by decisions made at a distance from the local community.

For the most part, local boards are reasonable stewards of the public purse, however, problems do arise when funding formulae and budget commitments are unpredictable. Budget commitments, once made, should not be changed in the school year for which they were made as this breeds a lack of belief in the system, particularly at the local level where the impact of such decisions are felt.

