



Alberta Education

Systems to Improve Student Attendance in
Northland School Division *Progress Report*

February 2018

About This Progress Report

A progress report is not an audit. We do not perform detailed audit procedures in a progress report. Instead, we base our assessment on interviews, analytical procedures and a review of management's documents. Therefore, in a progress report we do not provide audit-level assurance on our conclusions as we provide in our audit and follow-up audit reports.

We will use what we found in this progress report, along with information we will gather over the next year or two on improvements made by the department and the division, to plan our follow-up audit on the implementation of our three outstanding recommendations.

Summary of our previous work

In March 2015,¹ we reported on the systems to improve student attendance in Northland School Division. We found a system that accepted poor student attendance as the status quo. Despite decades of government studies, reports, recommendations and well-meaning statements, progress had been limited. The division's schools and central office did not have adequate systems to improve student attendance, and no one, at any level, was taking responsibility for poor attendance results.

We made two recommendations to Northland School Division and one recommendation to the Department of Education (see Appendix A). We said the division must develop a plan to guide its efforts to improve attendance, and the department must ensure the division does so.

Northland School Division

The Government of Alberta formed Northland School Division in 1960. The division brought several former Métis schools and First Nations mission and residential schools together under the provincial education system. The division is Alberta's only primarily Indigenous school division—more than 95 per cent of its students are Indigenous.

The division serves approximately 2,700 students. There are 23 schools in the division, spread across an area of Northern Alberta larger than Great Britain.

The Minister of Education dismissed the division's school board in January 2010 because of concerns over student performance, including attendance, staff turnover and governance. For seven years, the division reported to an Official Trustee appointed by the Minister of Education. In October 2017, the minister returned oversight of the division to an elected board.

Recent changes in Northland School Division

Since our March 2015 report, the senior leadership and management structure in the division has changed significantly. In mid-2016 the minister appointed a new Official Trustee and the division hired a new superintendent. In 2017, the division also made a change to its operating structure: it hired three new associate superintendents and designated each with responsibility for a particular geographic region and set of schools within the division.

Accountability for attendance

The division's superintendent is ultimately responsible for ensuring students attend school and is accountable to the school board.² The superintendent oversees the three

¹ *Report of the Auditor General of Alberta—March 2015*, page 17.

² Until October 2017, the Official Trustee performed the role of the school board in Northland School Division.

new associate superintendents, who are each responsible for attendance at the schools in their geographic region.

The Department of Education oversees education policy and regulations at school jurisdictions, including the division. The department reviews and approves the division's annual results reports and three-year business plans. While the department does not request information on attendance, since 2012 the division has reported on attendance to the department.

Regular school attendance matters

In Alberta, young people between ages six and 16 are required to attend school under the *School Act*. But legality aside, missing school means missing instructional time; between kindergarten and grade 12, a student who attends 85 per cent of the time would miss nearly two years of instruction. Regular attendance can be the difference between graduating or not. Poor attendance can also provide an early warning that a student may be encountering barriers to their success in school.

Objective of This Progress Report

During our 2015 audit, we were honoured to meet with community members, elders, parents and young people served by the division to speak about our work. They rightly asked us how, after more than 50 years of government studies, reports and inquiries, our work would be any different. We told those we spoke with that when we make a recommendation, we actively monitor the progress made to correct the problems we identified. We told those families and young people that we will continue our work until the division and the department can demonstrate they have made the needed changes.

When we make recommendations to government, we usually wait until management has told us they have implemented the recommendations we originally reported on. However, sometimes we believe there is enough risk of inaction to justify providing a progress report. There has been a history of inaction over the division, and we want to make sure that the division and department take the action necessary. We are using this progress report, therefore, to understand management's actions to date and their plans to complete implementation.

We conducted our field work between January and September 2017. We substantially completed our work on October 12, 2017.

Observations on Progress

Our recommendations from March 2015 were very specific; the decentralized and ad hoc approaches to dealing with poor student attendance were not working. We expected the division's first steps to implement our recommendations would be to develop a comprehensive plan for student attendance and put it into operation. After more than two years, we expected the division would report what its plan was and its results to date.

Since March 2015, the division and the department have not been idle. The division has new leadership and management structures. The department has amended the *Northland School Division Act*, returning local governance of the division to its communities with the election of a school board in October 2017. The division and department have also been working collaboratively on a number of fronts, including securing the approval for increased funding to help the division stabilize and begin making targeted investments in key areas, among them attendance.

These achievements are substantial, and they form a foundation capable of supporting improved student attendance—but the division still does not have a comprehensive plan for attendance. Without a plan to guide its efforts and actions, the division will not be successful in making meaningful and sustainable improvements in student attendance.

The department still must take action to ensure the division develops and operationalizes a plan for attendance.

Management's Assessment

We asked the division and the department to each report to us on what they have done to date and their plans going forward. We received these reports from the division and the department in early 2017. We summarize the actions reported by management in Appendix B.

Our Assessment

We provide here an overview of our assessment of the division's and the department's progress. See Appendix B for a fuller account, broken down by our original recommendations.

No comprehensive plan to guide attendance improvement

In March 2015, we reported that the division's approaches to improve attendance were not working because they did not follow a comprehensive plan, guided by the division's central office. Teachers and schools were working hard, but each school was doing different things, and no one knew whether their efforts were actually working, and why or why not.

During our 2015 audit the division worked with members of the communities it serves to develop a report on attendance, *Every Day Counts*. The report made suggestions for ways the division could improve attendance by taking actions at the school level and at the division's central office.

In March 2015, we reported that *Every Day Counts* was a good starting point, but the document needed to be adapted into a comprehensive attendance improvement plan that the division could successfully put into operation.

Every Day Counts, and the other strategies and plans in place at the time of our audit, needed to include the features of an effective plan. In particular, they needed:

- a clear and realistic goal or objective
- a prioritized list of credible, student-centred strategies
- an assessment of cost and resource requirements, by strategy
- clear and reasonable roles and responsibilities, including who was responsible for the plan overall
- a specific and realistic timeline to guide when the work would be done
- an approach to actively monitor and regularly report on the results of the plan over time

Since March 2015, the division has worked with communities on concepts from *Every Day Counts* and started a number of new initiatives for student attendance. The division has also done work to improve the way it monitors student attendance and to improve the reliability of its student attendance data.

These efforts are important, but the division's approach to student attendance is not fundamentally different from the situation we encountered in our audit. The initiatives that were started, and those to come, are at risk of not having a lasting impact because they are still not coordinated under a comprehensive, centrally managed plan.

Why planning matters—the general and the specific

We develop plans because resources, both dollars and time, are limited. When we want to achieve a goal and have the best impact with the limited resources available to us, we think carefully about where and when to put those resources into use. Why? Because life is noisy, hectic and full of things to distract our attention from our goal. Planning helps us cut through the noise and focus on what matters.

In the absence of a comprehensive plan, the initiatives and resources the division has applied so far have been of the "broad brush" kind, rather than being targeted at helping students with varying levels of attendance. Examples of such universal initiatives include classroom celebrations for good attendance, awards and recognition, and communication strategies raising general awareness. These types of universal interventions have their place, but they are not enough to overcome the barriers that prevent a chronically absent student from attending school. A significant amount of work remains at the division to support its chronically absent students or young people currently not attending school at all.

Good practices in attendance use a three-tier model of intervention to plan how to help students improve their attendance.³ This model recognizes that students who attend different amounts require different types of help: the poorer the attendance, the more intensive and student-focused the help becomes.

³ For example, the Attendance Works organization's "Three-Tiered System of Intervention," <http://www.attendanceworks.org/three-tiered-system-intervention/>, and Rocky View School Division's attendance initiative.

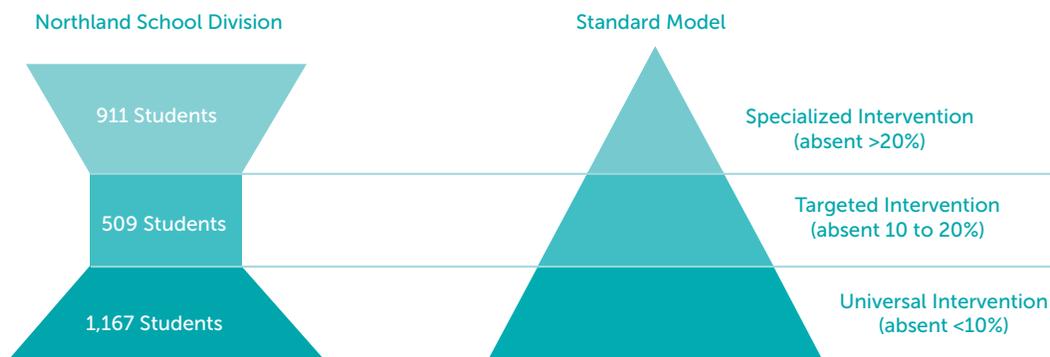


Figure 1: 2016–2017 Northland reported attendance (unaudited)⁴ vs. three-tier intervention model of attendance

The true challenge to improving attendance at the division becomes clear when we look at the situation in the division based on a three-tier model. The standard model used in good attendance practices assumes that the tiers become progressively smaller—that is, there are progressively fewer students requiring help as attendance worsens. In the division, the situation is quite different. The division has nearly as many students who attend less than 80 per cent of the time—those the model says require highly individualized intervention—as there are students who attend regularly.⁴

This is not to say that the three-tier model of needs-based intervention cannot apply to the division, but rather that to be successful, resources to support attendance improvement must align with need. If the only strategies put in place are targeting the minority of students who attend regularly—those in the “universal intervention” group in the diagram above—the division will not make sustainable improvement in its attendance.

Developing a comprehensive plan will help the division ensure its limited resources can go where they need to in order to reach its goal: improving its students’ attendance.

Key Observations

- The division still does not have a comprehensive plan to improve student attendance.
- In its role as a key oversight body, the Department of Education has not ensured that the division created a plan to improve attendance and put it into operation.

Department still must ensure the division develops a plan

The department has taken a number of actions supporting the division broadly and focusing on attendance in schools generally. These actions are important, but the division still needs help with its attendance right now. The department must ensure it oversees the immediate implementation of an effective plan to improve attendance in the division.

⁴ Attendance figures are from monthly attendance reporting that division management provided to the division’s Official Trustee and advisory board. The figures presented are the mean (average) student counts by attendance level for the months of September 2016 to June 2017. While we observed that the division has designed improvements to its attendance data management processes, we have not audited the numbers reported, so we cannot confirm their accuracy. We provide this information for illustrative purposes only.

Sharing good practices

In March 2015, we pointed to a number of good attendance practices from around Alberta. We suggested that, to ensure its plan is as effective and evidence-based as possible, the division study good practices and consider how it may adapt them to the division.

Since our original report, another jurisdiction, the Rocky View School Division, has experienced some early positive results with an attendance strategy.

We met with Rocky View to learn about its attendance initiative. We provide an overview of good practices from that initiative in Appendix C.

Recently, the department and the division have also met with Rocky View to better understand the Rocky View approach, what has worked and why.

Appendix A:

2015 OAG Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Develop a plan to improve student attendance⁵

We recommend that Northland School Division develop an operational plan with short- and long-term targets to improve student attendance.

The operational plan should include:

- measurable results and responsibilities
- a prioritized list of student-centred strategies, initiatives and programs
- documentation of the costs and resources required to action the strategies, initiatives and programs
- a specific timeline for implementation
- reporting on progress and accountability for improved attendance results

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Oversight by the department⁶

We recommend that the Department of Education exercise oversight of Northland School Division by ensuring:

- the division develops and executes an operational plan to improve student attendance
- the operational plan identifies the resources needed and how results will be measured, reported and analyzed

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Monitor and enforce student attendance⁷

We recommend that Northland School Division improve its guidance and procedures for schools to:

- consistently record and monitor student attendance
- benchmark acceptable attendance levels
- manage and follow up on non-attendance

⁵ *Report of the Auditor General of Alberta—March 2015, no. 1, page 23.*

⁶ *Report of the Auditor General of Alberta—March 2015, no. 2, page 23.*

⁷ *Report of the Auditor General of Alberta—March 2015, no. 3, page 30.*

Appendix B:

Summary of Progress

SUMMARY OF STATUS

Management & OAG Assessments

| Recommendation | Management Assessment | OAG Assessment |
|---|---|---|
| 1. The division should develop a plan to improve student attendance |  |  |
| 2. The department should exercise oversight |  |  |
| 3. The division should monitor and enforce student attendance |  |  |

Legend

-  Good progress
-  Limited progress
-  Unsatisfactory progress

The table above highlights a difference between management's view of its progress in responding to two of our March 2015 recommendations and our own view of their progress.

The widest gap in perspective is with the department's management. In response to our recommendation, and as part of an overall strategy for the division, the department has taken a very broad and holistic approach—marshalling resources from throughout the department and across government with a view to making long-term improvements and reducing barriers to success in school. Their approach is not without merit and can make a positive difference, over time and with continued support.

But our recommendation calls for something altogether more focused: make sure the division has a credible plan to improve attendance, and make sure they put it into operation. Such a plan is necessary to provide the individualized support each chronically absent student needs to improve his or her attendance. We believe that this is a reasonable expectation and that any delay in implementing such a plan is a missed opportunity for the division's students.

We provide a more detailed assessment of each recommendation in the following pages.

RECOMMENDATION 1:
Develop a plan to improve student attendance

| | | |
|------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Management assessment: |  | Limited progress |
| OAG assessment: |  | Unsatisfactory progress |

Our expectations

We expected that among the division’s first steps would be to develop a comprehensive plan and put it into operation. After more than two years, we expected the division would report what its plan was and what the results of it had been to date.

What management has done to date

The division reported to us that it is working on developing a plan. The division continues to work closely with communities on the suggestions from the *Every Day Counts* report. In the fall of 2016, it hired a consultant to advise on effective planning. The division also purchased a strategic planning application that will allow it to easily distribute its plan to schools and allow them to report back.

The division has also developed several individual initiatives focused on attendance, including:

- a tool that allows schools to assess their own progress in implementing attendance strategies and report their progress to the division
- a tool that supports schools in understanding their own challenges to attendance and developing their own strategies
- committees of community members and school staff focused on attendance at each school
- a robust communications strategy to guide how the division and its schools communicate the importance of attendance to students, parents and the broader community

What remains to be done

The initiatives that are in place, and those to come, are at risk of not meeting the division’s objectives, because they are still not coordinated under a comprehensive plan. The division must ensure it develops and deploys a plan, coordinated from its central office and managed by regional associate superintendents, to improve student attendance in the division. The division should regularly measure and assess the effectiveness of the plan in meeting its objectives.

A key to an effective plan is to recognize that students who have different levels of attendance require different amounts and types of help. The division’s initiatives to date have focused on incentives to students, community outreach, and making schools more inviting places—the types of activities that are effective at getting students with already good attendance to attend even more and prevent good attenders becoming chronically absent. For sustainable long-term success, the division will also need to develop student-centred approaches for its students who are chronic non-attenders or currently not attending at all.

It is important that the division study good practices from other school jurisdictions working to improve attendance, such as Rocky View School Division, and consider if these practices may be useful in the division.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Oversight by the department

Management assessment:  Good progress

OAG assessment:  Unsatisfactory progress

Our expectations

Following our report, we expected the department would have ensured that the division prioritized developing and implementing a comprehensive plan to improve attendance.

What management has done to date

The department reported a number of actions taken to respond to our recommendation. It reported that it has:

- set up a committee of representatives from various ministries to determine how government can provide broad support to Northland School Division and its communities, including a subcommittee focused on attendance
- retained a consultant to assess the division's budgetary pressures
- approved a five-year, 20 per cent funding increase for the division to aid in, among many activities, incremental initiatives to support student attendance
- made changes to the Alberta Attendance Board by focusing it more on helping Alberta school boards better prevent and resolve student non-attendance and reserving formal board hearings as a true last resort
- supported summer literacy camps in northern Alberta communities, including several communities that the division serves
- spread awareness of the division throughout the department and sought input from across the department on what resources might be available to help
- developed a framework and strategy for how it will oversee the division's attendance plan. The department recently approved the framework and strategy and shared them with the division.

The time that the department has been able to devote to attendance in the division has been limited because it has been working with the division and its communities toward amending the *Northland School Division Act* and reinstating the division's board of trustees in October 2017.

In summary, the department has taken some action on the division, and it has taken some action on attendance. But its actions specific to overseeing the division's attendance have been more limited. The evidence for this: in more than two years the division still does not have a comprehensive plan for student attendance.

What remains to be done

The department must ensure the division develops and implements a comprehensive plan to improve attendance. More than two years without a plan may not seem unreasonable, but for a young person in school those two years of inaction may be the difference between graduating and not.

RECOMMENDATION 3:
Monitor and enforce student attendance

| | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| Management assessment: | ● | Good progress |
| OAG assessment: | ● | Good progress |

Our expectations

We expected to see the division’s plan clearly focused on clarifying and strengthening how it monitors and enforces student attendance in all schools throughout the division. We also expected specific focus on strengthening its controls over the reliability of its student attendance data.

What management has done to date

The division reported on a number of steps to improve the way it monitors and enforces attendance, including:

- clarifying its processes and providing training to school staff on how attendance should be monitored and enforced across the division
- hiring a full-time IT specialist to make needed improvements to the division’s attendance data and data management practices
- defining a set of standard attendance codes for all schools to use across the division when recording attendance in its data system
- providing schools and division staff with an actionable toolkit to help effectively communicate the importance of attendance to students and parents

These actions provide a strong basis for the division to continue making improvements. The division has focused on improving the quality and consistency of its data. Its progress to date will provide the foundation for improved attendance monitoring processes. We also observed that the actions are aligned with good attendance practices, such as those being developed in Rocky View School Division.

What remains to be done

The division still must make improvements to the way it monitors attendance, the way it ensures its schools are following policy, and how it understands why students are not attending school.

The attendance data system should now have more reliable information from school-level activities, but the division is not yet using its data to ensure that it understands which students are experiencing chronic non-attendance and that school-level actions are being taken to meet the needs of students. Once the division understands which students, in which schools, are experiencing barriers to attendance, it can take steps to ensure schools develop a robust understanding of the reasons and take targeted action to support each student needing assistance.

Fundamentally, good practices show that positive change can result from a student-centred approach based on a strong understanding of why a student is not attending. Each student who is chronically absent needs a plan in place that reflects that student’s unique needs.

Appendix C:

Good Practice in Alberta—Rocky View School Division’s Attendance Initiative

Present for A Purpose—a Student-Centred Approach

Rocky View School Division started an attendance innovation campaign, called “Present for a Purpose,” in the 2016–2017 school year. The campaign began with a pilot at four schools in Rocky View.

Rocky View obtained financial support for the project through a grant from a private donor. The donor provided two years of funding for a full-time position to lead the initiative, along with related administrative support. The grant also provided a specific allocation of money to support one-off direct supports to individual families and students in need, designed to quickly remove or reduce specific barriers to attendance—such as the need for dental work or reliable transportation.

The pilot has seen promising results. In the 2015–2016 school year, approximately 200 students at the pilot schools were chronically absent—defined within the initiative as a student who is absent more than 10 per cent of the time. By the end of the first year of its pilot, the 2016–2017 school year, Rocky View reported that it had reduced the number of chronically absent students from 200 to 20.

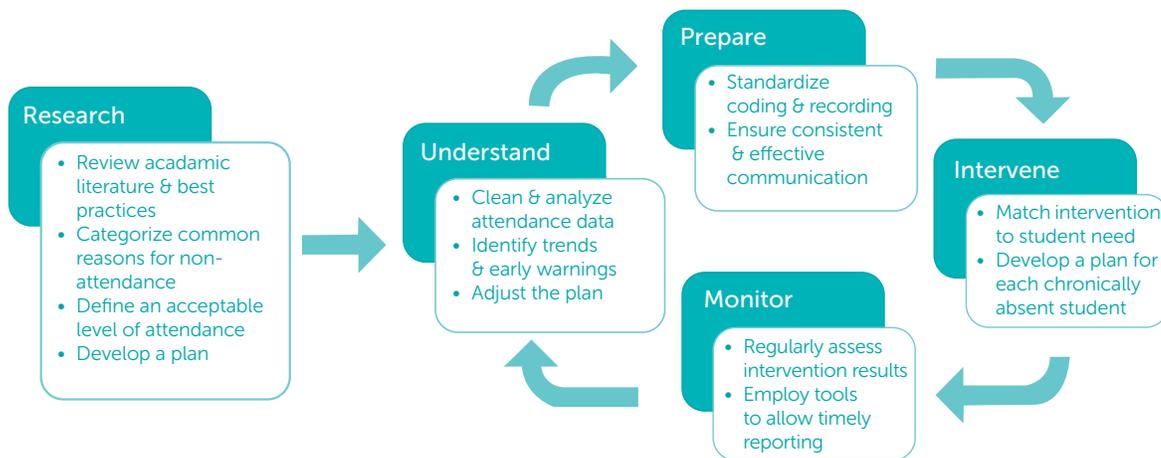


Figure C1: Student-centred approach to attendance intervention

While the long-term and full-scale results of the approach remain to be seen, we took note of Rocky View’s attendance initiative for three reasons:

- 1) it is student-centred and recognizes that different students with different levels of attendance need different kinds of help
- 2) it is elegantly simple in its delivery at the school level, meaning teaching staff can play a role in the strategy without taking too much attention and time away from teaching
- 3) its plan is fixated on one outcome, and one outcome only: improving attendance

Each school authority has unique geographies and demographics to consider, and a strategy that works in one division may not necessarily work in others. But what Rocky View’s case seems to support is that a comprehensive student-centred plan, centrally directing and regularly monitoring key business activities, can make a difference.