

Education—Systems to Improve Student Attendance in Northland School Division

SUMMARY

Regular school attendance is critical to student success. Poor student attendance has been a significant and longstanding problem in Northland School Division. About one-third of the division's students remain chronically absent despite many years of reporting on this situation, and despite what was to have been a concerted attempt to deal with attendance following the 2010 Inquiry Team Report.¹ Factors that contribute to poor attendance are numerous and complex.

At the school division and Department of Education levels, the story is simpler; necessary improvements have not been made, despite the need being highlighted in the inquiry report and in commitments made afterward. The division has not produced a workable plan; oversight at all levels, including the department, has failed. Lack of coordination, weaknesses in reporting systems; and the absence of a student-centred approach are all contributors.

One factor stands out—poor attendance is too often accepted as the status quo.

This is not a situation that's accepted elsewhere in Alberta. Reports and statements by school officials and ministers of education have suggested that poor attendance would not be accepted in Northland School Division either. But it has been. And it still is.

While student attendance problems are wrapped up in other challenges facing northern communities, dealing with non-attendance has not been a priority or thought to be achievable until other problems are solved. A more direct and purposeful approach is available.

Our recommendations deal directly with failures at the institutional level. They call for the department to provide better oversight and the division to develop an effective operational plan.

Because school attendance involves students and their families or caregivers, we consulted the community for views of groups and families directly involved. This approach was necessary to produce an accurate and comprehensive report. It also reflected the principle that our office is accountable to Albertans as well as to Members of the Legislative Assembly. Our community consultations found a strong desire for a better school experience among the people directly affected, and several strong ideas about how to improve things.

What we examined

Our audit objective was to assess if the division has adequate systems to improve student attendance.

We examined accountability for attendance results systems and looked at the division's oversight of its schools and the department's oversight of the division. We interviewed staff and tested attendance practices at 10 schools across the division, at the division's central office and at the department.

¹ The Northland School Division Inquiry Team Report to the Honourable Dave Hancock, Minister of Education, Department of Education, November 2010.

We also held meetings to discuss student attendance in two communities—Wabasca–Desmarais and Gift Lake. We met with key stakeholders including parents and caregivers, students and former students, teachers and other school staff, administrators, local school board committee members, elders and other community members.

Conclusion

The division's schools and central office do not have adequate systems to improve student attendance. There is no accountability for attendance results at all levels of the division and by the department. Oversight of attendance improvement by both the department and the division is inadequate.

What we found

In January 2010 the Minister of Education dismissed the division's elected school board, appointed an official trustee and called for a full inquiry. Poor attendance was one of his main concerns. Many recommendations were made in late 2010. They had been made before too.

We expected the division to develop an action plan to guide the implementation of required changes. We also expected the department to put the full force of its expertise and resources into supporting the division and its schools and provide regular oversight on the plan development and the results from its implementation—instead we found no actionable plan on improving attendance by the division and oversight of improved attendance has failed at every level in the division and by the department. The result after five years is limited progress; attendance remains unacceptably low.

Systems to monitor attendance within the division are not well designed or operating as intended. At least one-third of the division's 2,700 students² are chronically absent and there are no plans in place to monitor their attendance or make the necessary improvements to better support them. Schools do not have consistent processes to record attendance and controls over attendance are weak. The division has not provided schools adequate guidance on recording and monitoring attendance, does not have processes to ensure attendance data is reliable and accurate, and does not have adequate support and training for its attendance tracking system.

We had planned to analyze the division's attendance data for the past five years. But the data is inconsistent and the system lacks controls, so we could not include this assessment as part of our audit results. We also planned to compare this information to student results on provincial achievement and diploma exams and the division's tracking of teacher absences and bus route operations to identify potential trends or correlations between these factors and student attendance. This analysis would provide valuable information to the division in understanding some of the indirect factors that impact student attendance.

The division's strategies on student attendance have not resulted in system-wide improvements. The division has not analyzed attendance results to identify the root causes of poor attendance. Schools do not provide sufficient information because the reasons for student absences and follow-up actions are not documented. Annual school plans lacked detail in identifying strategies for improvement and had inadequate reporting of results. The division's combined three-year business plan and annual education results reporting did not incorporate attendance strategies from its schools' plans, and did not provide

² This information is based on accumulated absences reported on June 2014 attendance registers for the 2013–2014 school year in the division's attendance tracking system. Chronically absent in this context means a student missed 20 per cent or more of school days over the year.

detailed information on steps taken to improve attendance. The division reported specific attendance results to the department in its quarterly education reports. The department failed to take action despite continuing low results.

What needs to be done

To achieve its objective to improve attendance, the division must develop an operational plan with short- and long-term targets to improve attendance. The plan needs:

- 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, achievable timeline for implementation
- reporting on progress and accountability for improved attendance results

The department must oversee the division to ensure it develops and implements this plan. The department also needs to ensure the plan establishes the resources required and how results will be measured, reported and analyzed.

Student attendance will not improve because of a single act or strategy or program. The division and its schools must provide support for students including those with chronic non-attendance. Each of the division's communities is unique and the schools' students reflect this diversity. Understanding and assessing the needs of each student is critical to success.

The challenge for the division is that the reasons students do not attend school are complex. They are intertwined in many layers of First Nation and Métis history. There has been a history of inaction due to the complexity and the magnitude of the challenges. Results will not improve without significant changes. Coordinated action is paramount.

The division's central office can better support its schools by improving its guidance and procedures to monitor student attendance. This action would include developing a consistent approach for schools to manage and follow up on non-attendance. The office can also improve controls to ensure student attendance data is accurate and reliable. Reliable data is the basis of a good system.

Why this is important to Albertans

All students in Alberta have a right and a responsibility to attend school and receive an education. The Department of Education has to ensure appropriate systems are in place to make this happen. Attendance systems are not working in Northland School Division. Improving these systems is critical to the future success of the children.

AUDIT OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

Our audit objective was to assess if there are adequate systems to improve student attendance in Northland School Division. Attending school regularly is essential to educational achievement. To succeed in school, students must attend.

We examined attendance data for the division and assessed the systems individual schools and the division use to monitor attendance. We developed an understanding of the programs and initiatives to improve attendance results—incentives and sanctions to enforce compulsory attendance required by

the *School Act* and to identify and mitigate the underlying barriers to attendance such as the relationship between student attendance, engagement and achievement.

Our scope included activities and strategies implemented since January 2010, when the minister appointed an official trustee and a three-member inquiry team.

Two areas, both important factors in providing a safe and healthy learning environment for the students, were not included in our audit scope:

Governance—A governance model is critical to show collaboration and engagement between the communities and schools within the division. School boards give an important voice to parents in the communities. The dissolution of the division’s school board in January 2010 means that a legislative change is required to the *Northlands School Division Act*. The department has said it expects changes soon, so we excluded governance from our audit.

School infrastructure and teacher housing—Mould, poor air quality and the deterioration of some schools are risks to student safety and a positive learning environment. Teacher housing has been identified repeatedly as causing reduced teacher satisfaction and retention. The condition of school facilities and teacher housing is beyond the scope of our audit. We may audit this area another time.

We conducted our field work from June 2014 to February 2015. We substantially completed our audit on February 12, 2015. Our audit was conducted in accordance with the *Auditor General Act* and the standards for assurance engagements set by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada.

BACKGROUND

School attendance is mandatory in Alberta. The *School Act* requires individuals between the ages of six and sixteen years to attend school.³ Parents and caregivers have the main responsibility for a student’s attendance at school. The *School Act* sets out school jurisdictions’ right to make rules with respect to student attendance.⁴ Regular school attendance is a critical factor in student success. No school system or its learning initiatives will be successful if students are not regularly attending. Non-attendance is an early indicator that a student is at risk of not completing high school and can be a symptom of a range of underlying barriers to attendance.

Northland School Division

Northland School Division covers a large portion of northern Alberta. Its 24 schools have 2,700 students.⁵ The vast territory creates challenges, as there are often large distances between schools and the division’s central office in Peace River or the nearest major centre.

The division was formed in 1960 to bring several former Métis schools and First Nations mission and residential schools together under provincial standards. The plan was to bring these schools together within a provincial school jurisdiction so that problems such as poor infrastructure, a lack of qualified

³ The *School Act RSA2000*, Section 13(1). Mandatory school age will increase to 17 in the new *Education Act*, which was passed by the legislature in December 2012 but has not been proclaimed into effect.

⁴ The *School Act RSA2000*, Section 60(3)(b).

⁵ Total enrolment for 2013–2014 was 2,703—Alberta Education.

teachers and poor communication could be improved. The legacy of the residential school history in the division is strong: it hired some teachers from former residential schools as those schools were closed.⁶

The division is Alberta's only primarily Aboriginal school jurisdiction; 95 per cent of its student population is made up of students from First Nations, six of Alberta's eight Métis settlements and non-status Aboriginals living off-reserve. The division's 2013–2014 budget was \$60.5 million (2012–2013 \$61.9 million).

In our visits to the division and its schools, we better understood the significant obstacles they face. Gift Lake's students and staff have been relocated many times over the past four years because of mould problems. Bussing was a big problem for a quarter of the division's schools in 2013–2014.⁷ Mistassiniy School's students and staff have dealt with eleven separate student deaths from the community since mid-2011. Father R. Perin School began the 2014–2015 school year with an almost all new staff and administration, as only one of its staff returned from the prior year.

The division's chronic problems include high teacher and staff absences and turnover; deteriorating infrastructure; poor facilities (libraries, science and computer labs); insufficient support for students with English as a second language and for students with learning disabilities; and intergenerational effects of residential schools including poverty, addictions, mental health and family trauma. These challenges are complicated by the division's vast size and remoteness and small size of its schools.

Improving the education outcomes for Alberta's First Nations, Métis and Inuit young people has been one of the department's main goals for over 10 years.⁸ However, success has been elusive. Within the division, the department has studied this problem repeatedly for the past 40 years. The most recent was the Inquiry Team Report in 2010. The report summarizes 10 recurring recommendations that have been made each decade without significant improvement (see Appendix A for details).

In January 2010 the Minister of Education replaced the division's 23-member board of trustees with an official trustee and appointed a three-person inquiry team to review the division's operations. The minister took this action due to concerns over student achievement, low graduation rates and high teacher and administrator turnover. The inquiry focused on student achievement, governance and instructional and administrative leadership. The inquiry team made 48 recommendations for improvement in its November 2010 report: 31 of them are directed to the division and 17 to the department or the province.⁹

⁶ Northland—The Founding of a Wilderness School System, by J.W. Chalmers.

⁷ Buses in Fort Chipewyan ran 30 per cent of the time. Five other schools in the division had no bussing for 10 per cent or more of school days.

⁸ As identified in the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework, Alberta Education, 2002; in Alberta Education's business plans from 2010 to 2013, Goal Three: Success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Students (FNMI); and in Alberta Education's 2014 business plan, Goal Two: Success for Every Student, including eliminating the achievement gap between FNMI students and all other students.

⁹ The Inquiry Team Report addressed three recommendations directly to the province of Alberta rather than the Department of Education. The recommendations deal with the division's boundaries (recommendation #1) and specific amendments to legislation (recommendations #38 and 42).

The department identified three areas that the division would focus on:

- developing English and Aboriginal language and numeracy
- improving student attendance
- working with a community based team to strengthen parental engagement with schools by improving communication and trust

The minister also formed a community based team to assess and respond to the inquiry report recommendations. This team submitted its report in January 2012, prioritizing the 48 recommendations and outlining a community engagement framework.

In June 2014 the department publicly released the report and responded to Inquiry Team and Community Engagement Team Reports. The department reported that of the 48 recommendations, 12 were implemented and 32 were accepted, including the recommendation to improve student attendance. Four were not accepted.

The division reports its progress implementing the Inquiry Team recommendations in its annual combined business plan and results report. In the report, the division's achievement remains among the lowest in the province.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategies to improve attendance and reduce absences

Background

The department does not receive or monitor attendance data from school jurisdictions. The department monitors performance based on an accountability framework that uses a consistent set of performance measures to report on results. Measures of attendance are not part of the department's performance reporting. The department also makes several resources and tools, based on best practices, available at school jurisdictions.

A key part of the department's performance reporting process is the development of a combined Annual Education Results Report (AERR) and a three-year business plan from each Alberta school jurisdiction. The department provides guidance through key department goals that each jurisdiction must include in their reporting. The Field Services Division performs a compliance review of jurisdictions' business plans and results reporting. The department issues a compliance letter if its requirements are met.

Since 2012 the division has reported on its progress implementing recommendations made in the Inquiry Team Report. This includes the recommendation to improve attendance and several others that deal with barriers to student attendance.

The division also gives the department a quarterly Education Report. This is required under funding agreements between the department and the division. Reports include updates on divisional priorities, enrolment, staffing positions, staff and student attendance, and school and division success stories.

The division superintendent requires each school to prepare its own annual education plan and results report to support the division's combined AERR and three-year business plan. Division administration reviews each report and provides feedback to schools if reporting is insufficient. Schools receive guidance from the division on which goals to include. In the 2012–2013 and 2013–2014 school years the division required schools to include student attendance in their annual reports.

RECOMMENDATION 1: DEVELOP PLAN TO IMPROVE STUDENT ATTENDANCE

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 DEPARTMENT

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

Criteria: the standards for our audit

The division should have systems to:

- clearly communicate student attendance objectives and strategies to meet them
- establish reasonable targets to measure progress in meeting attendance objectives
- develop and implement initiatives to achieve attendance objectives
- support schools in using strategies to promote attendance and remove barriers to attendance
- report on attendance results and the outcomes of attendance objectives
- periodically evaluate its progress in meeting attendance objectives against established targets
- analyze results to assess if any change in approach is necessary

To ensure adequate oversight by the department, the division should:

- give the department enough information on its progress in improving attendance
- receive enough guidance from the department on its strategies to improve attendance

Our audit findings

KEY FINDINGS

- The division's strategies have not improved student attendance.
- The division has not identified root causes of non-attendance. Schools do not adequately document the reason for school absences and follow-up actions taken.
- The division has not assessed best practices from other jurisdictions or its own schools to improve attendance.
- The department's oversight has failed because it did not signal changes in preferred behaviour when the division reported limited action to improve attendance.
- Department resources are not coordinated with the division's efforts to improve attendance.

Operational plan to improve attendance

School strategies

i. Strategies to improve attendance

School plans for 2012–2013 and 2013–2014 have several strategies to improve attendance, such as:

- **strategies to directly encourage attendance**—acknowledgement of good attendance in school assemblies, newsletters and letters home; notices on bulletin boards and other common areas; incentive programs offering small prizes, gifts and lunches
- **strategies to improve attendance monitoring**—phone calls home when students are absent, increased home visits, discussions at regular staff meetings
- **strategies to indirectly encourage attendance**—operational school buses, improved school maintenance; more option classes, field trips, sports equipment and teams, career fairs

Results reporting on specific strategies was limited. Half of the schools did not set a measurable target for their attendance plans. Schools with a target did not evaluate the effectiveness of specific strategies. There was little continuity in attendance plans from one year to the next.

The superintendent said division staff review the plans, but the division has no process to assess or document feedback to administrators on their plans. Because of limited reporting on results, the division cannot share best practices among schools.

Division strategies and initiatives

i. Annual education plans

In the annual plans we reviewed, the division identified attendance as a priority. The division has focused on developing a division-wide literacy strategy and other strategies intended to reduce barriers to student engagement and attendance and relied on each school to develop its own community based initiatives to increase attendance, as noted above.

The division had not set measurable targets to monitor its progress in improving student attendance. The division's attendance plans do not incorporate the strategies in individual school plans.

ii. Department review of annual education plans

We examined reporting for the past three years. In the past two years the department commended the division for preparing well-developed and comprehensive reports. The department repeatedly noted the division's low results on the department's performance reporting. In 2012 the department acknowledged the results are "indicative of the numerous challenges such as student attendance, teacher retention, student achievement, curricular knowledge, and understanding and incorporating cultural differences, the jurisdiction is grappling with."

Northland School Division's New attendance initiative

During our audit, the division developed a new attendance improvement initiative. The initiative was approved by the Official Trustee on January 30, 2015. This activity shows that the division is ready to actively work on its attendance systems and results.

The committee made 29 recommendations—18 to the division’s schools and 11 to central office. The report identifies many important areas where improvements are required but doesn’t provide sufficient direction and guidance on how schools are to implement 18 new recommendations.

Recommendation wording is vague in some instances. An absence of clear definitions, objective measures and direct wording will result in inconsistent application of recommendations at schools and central office.

The following factors indicate a lack of strategic planning to implement and monitor the initiative:

- Realistic goals for the initiative are missing in the set timeframe.
- Objective milestones to measure progress are missing.
- Neither the committee nor the division has developed a plan to actively monitor the outcomes of the initiative or report its results.
- Neither central office nor individual schools have fully considered the time or human and financial resources required to implement the 29 recommendations.
- The division asked schools to begin implementing working recommendations in September 2014. But during our field work, neither the committee nor the division had a process to monitor schools’ progress implementing the recommendations.

The initiative does not include all the elements required of a robust plan but it is a good starting point. The division can use the information to create a workable operational plan to implement sustainable changes.

Analyzing results and seeking best practices

Division processes to improve attendance have not resulted in significant improvements. Some schools have successful strategies but it is hard to isolate and share them due to a lack of evidence-based documentation and reporting on results.

i. Community consultation

To better understand how key stakeholders within the division view attendance, we held meetings in two communities with parents and caregivers, grandparents, students, former students, teachers, administrators, local school board committee members, elders and other community leaders. They discussed what is and is not working and what could best improve attendance. Common themes from these discussions were:

- Some parents and guardians have not ensured their children regularly attend school. Some families may require older children to look after younger siblings, and travel with family members is sometimes required to larger communities for needed services and appointments.
- Some students in the division face multiple barriers getting to and staying in school. At home they may face poverty, addictions and a lack of parental/guardian support. At school they may face academic challenges, bullying and peer pressure.
- Systemic issues include transportation, poor infrastructure, a lack of programming options and extracurricular activities, high teacher absentee rates and turnover and intergenerational effects of residential schools and racism.

Further details of what we heard from communities are included in Appendix B.

These themes are similar to what the Inquiry Team reported from their consultations with 23 communities in 2010.¹⁰ Student attendance has improved very little over the past five years. Because the need is so great, a strategic approach is required. The division is not responsible for resolving all these problems as some are beyond the education system's ability to tackle. Consideration must be made of what factors the division can directly influence and which require other support programs or communities to resolve. A risk-based approach would focus attention on the students.

ii. Student-centred approach

A new approach to improving student attendance, focused on building success at each level, is required.

Other school jurisdictions have had success increasing attendance. The division can learn from them by investigating practices others have used to successfully support students and assessing if they would work in the division. For example, Edmonton Catholic Schools established the FNMI High School Graduation Coach Program at St. Joseph High School in 2009. From 2008 through 2011, the program increased the school's FNMI graduation rates from 14.9 per cent to 60.4 per cent.¹¹ The program focuses on relationships and mentoring, transitions, culture, career counselling, academics and parental engagement. The program has since been introduced in three other Edmonton high schools.

In Fort McMurray both the Catholic and public school districts have had significant success improving high school completion and provincial achievement and diploma results for their First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.¹² The districts identified attendance as a "matter of connectivity: each student needs to be connected with the school and with an educational program that is meaningful."¹³

These programs succeed by connecting with each student and having a learning/career plan for each student. They have a dedicated counsellor/coach establish a relationship with each student and build a range of supports for them. They focus on establishing a sense of belonging and pride in their culture and history. And on celebrating success and planning for the future.

Early intervention is imperative because readiness for school is another important factor.¹⁴ Students' needs must be assessed early to establish good attendance practices with family support. Junior high is a key focus for transitions and connecting with students to establish a foundation for success. Fort McMurray Catholic School District indicated that students who reach Grade 10 will very likely graduate.¹⁵

Implications and risks if recommendation not implemented

Without a specific plan to improve attendance, the division is less likely to put resources into the most critical areas to implement programs and processes to optimize student success.

¹⁰ Northland School Division Inquiry Team Report, November 2010, Appendix 7, Part C, pages 36-47.

¹¹ High School Graduation Coach Program Evaluation, November 2014, Researcher: Sean Lessard, K-12 Inspire Institute, page 38 of 48.

¹² First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education: Promising practices in Fort McMurray, Alberta Education, November 2013.

¹³ Ibid, page 4.

¹⁴ The need for early intervention was identified as one of the 10 recurring recommendations identified in Appendix A.

¹⁵ First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education: Promising practices in Fort McMurray, Alberta Education, November 2013.

Oversight by the department

The lack of improvement of student attendance systems at the division highlights a failure of oversight throughout the division and by the department. The department has not held the division accountable for improving attendance results systems despite it being a long-standing problem and the division repeatedly indicating plans to improve attendance were not working. The department must ensure the Official Trustee holds the division superintendent accountable for improving student attendance results systems.

The department and the division have spent time and money on initiatives and projects with significant potential. But they have failed to get the desired results. The following are examples. These efforts have largely failed because of the lack of a coordinated strategy, action plan and consistent support.

Inquiry team and community engagement team reports

In preparing its report, the Inquiry Team visited each community in the division and consulted widely with stakeholders. The communities felt they were being heard and the longstanding problems in their schools were a key government priority. Attendance was identified as a priority recommendation. The report also made other recommendations in many areas that have been identified as barriers to attendance.

After the Inquiry Report, the department and the division set up an action team to assess the recommendations. Regular meetings were held and an initial proposed costing was developed by the division, but it was not acted on. The frequency of meetings decreased over time. The division continued to report its actions and progress in quarterly education reports and in its annual education plan but any significant progress stalled.

When the department released the Inquiry Team Report in January 2011, it announced a Community Engagement Team would assess the report and provide a community based response. The Community Engagement Team provided its response to the department in January 2012. The department's strategy in response to these two reports was first submitted to the minister in April 2013. The department and the minister were publicly silent on both reports until June 2014.

The division and its schools have launched a literacy strategy across the division, which was another priority identified in the Inquiry Team Report and an important factor in supporting student success. They have worked towards other strategies related to Inquiry Team Report recommendations that can be incorporated and prioritized into an overall student-centred approach. The division has reported its ability to make needed changes has been hampered due to funding and resource limitations and the overwhelming extent of the needs.

In the four years since the Inquiry Team Report was released, the division, with the department's oversight, has made only limited progress implementing the report's recommendations focused on improving attendance because they have not worked together to:

- form a multi-stakeholder implementation team to develop and deliver strategies for improvement identified in the Inquiry Report
- develop an operational plan to identify the timing, cost and resources required to make needed changes
- agree on a coordinated strategy to make needed changes

Other department initiatives and strategies

The department has designed programs to assist school jurisdictions improve attendance and First Nations, Métis and Inuit achievement. Each of the following represents a missed opportunity by the department to potentially make significant change in the division to improve student attendance.

i. Eliminating the Gap Initiative

The department acted in September 2013 to provide more support to school jurisdictions that continued to have a significant gap between FNMI and non-FNMI student results. The department used its achievement results data to analyze the top five and lowest five provincial school jurisdictions on measures of achievement test and diploma exam participation and results.

The department identified 24 school jurisdictions, including the division, for further support and intervention. The department communicated with each superintendent, reinforcing the department's commitment to Goal 2 of the Ministry Business Plan (the achievement gap between FNMI students and all other students is eliminated) and asking superintendents to meet with department staff to discuss FNMI student performance using available data. The desire was for the school jurisdictions to develop local action plans with greater accountability for results.

The division was included in the initial communication for this initiative, but to date there has been only limited action or follow up. The department did not provide specific results reporting to the division as it did for other jurisdictions.

The department's commitment in rolling out this initiative was "to ensure your needs and challenges [the divisions'] are understood and to offer the support and resources possible from the department to enable the implementation of local action plans that will address the achievement gap." There is no documentation of discussions by the department and division on eliminating the gap and no action plan has been implemented. The department and division indicated that when they discussed the initiative, they decided that all efforts taken in the division are designed to improve student outcomes, so no specific efforts were required relative to the eliminating the gap initiative. The department has said it will follow up more diligently this year. We would have expected a more concerted effort by the department to support the division in developing and implementing a local action plan.

ii. Every Student Counts—Keeping Kids in School Report Project

The department concluded a two-year project in June 2014 and reported on student attendance and truancy. The report was designed to provide leadership and support to the department, stakeholders and school jurisdictions. The report was based on surveys and interviews with 16 Alberta school jurisdictions with low dropout rates, positive high school completion rates and minimal referrals to the Attendance Board. Interviews were conducted with school staff, school superintendents, members of the Attendance Board and student focus groups. The report summarizes relevant research and provides strategies to improve student attendance.

The report is available online for school jurisdictions to use as a tool in improving student attendance. Despite known attendance issues, the department did not work with the division to apply the report to help improve attendance and school completion in the division. The department worked on the attendance improvement project for two years without involving the division, which shows a lack of communication and collaboration towards common objectives.

iii. *Community Based Aboriginal Teacher Education Program*

A common barrier to division students regularly attending school is a lack of local educators who understand the FNMI community and want to stay in the community over the long term. In 2009 the department introduced a pilot project to increase the number of FNMI teachers and support staff in northern Alberta. The program provided funding to education para-professionals working in remote northern schools while completing a Bachelor of Education degree through a distance-delivery model—without leaving their communities. The program was a collaborative effort between northern Alberta post-secondary institutions and the University of Alberta’s Aboriginal Teacher Education Program.

The initial program had participants from seven northern and two urban school jurisdictions including Northland School Division. In exchange for a four-year return of service, participants were paid a portion of their salary and benefits, and were reimbursed for tuition, books and fees. Funding was cost-shared by the department and participating school jurisdictions. The first graduates began teaching for the 2013–2014 school year. The 20 new teachers that began in the division are currently in their second year of teaching.¹⁶ One was awarded the Alberta School Board Association’s award for best new teacher in northern Alberta.

The department did not continue the program beyond the pilot project after concluding the program was too expensive. The department is assessing the results and discussing alternatives for future programming.

Implications and risks if recommendation not implemented

Without appropriate oversight by the department, the division’s likelihood of success is reduced and the risk of failing another generation of the division’s children increases.

Monitoring attendance

Background

The *School Act* requires students aged 6 to 16 attend school regularly and on time. It also defines excusable absences as “sickness or other unavoidable cause”, religious holidays, suspensions or expulsions, or as prescribed by the board or the minister.¹⁷ The superintendent is the attendance officer for the division.¹⁸ The division’s attendance procedure¹⁹ requires the principal to keep an accurate record of student attendance for every student in the school.

Teachers in elementary and junior high schools take attendance each morning and afternoon; those in high school take attendance for each block or period. Teachers have to tell parents by phone call or a note when attendance becomes a concern. Teachers also have to notify the principal when a student misses 20 per cent of the days in one month—typically about four days a month. The principal has to work with the teacher, community liaison worker, parent/guardian and/or the Local School Board Committee to improve the student’s attendance.

¹⁶ Nineteen of the teachers are employed in Northland School Division and one has transferred to a First Nation school located in the area.

¹⁷ *The School Act*, S 13(5)

¹⁸ The attendance officer is defined in the *School Act* as the superintendent or any other person designated by the board as an attendance officer. Section 14(1) of the Act outlines the authorities of the attendance officer to enforce attendance.

¹⁹ NSD attendance procedure 301(1)

If local efforts fail, the principal has to notify the superintendent, who has to inform the parents or guardians, encourage improvement and tell them of their responsibilities. If these efforts don't work, the superintendent can notify the Attendance Board or other appropriate authority.

The division uses a software program to collect and report information on students, including student attendance. This program allows web-based access for both the schools and the division to share and report student information.

School administration has to print attendance reports monthly, by class, and forward them to the division's central office. School principals report monthly attendance to Local School Board Committees and the Superintendent reports monthly attendance to the Official Trustee.

RECOMMENDATION 3: MONITOR AND ENFORCE STUDENT ATTENDANCE

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

Criteria: the standards for our audit

The division should have systems to assess if it is improving student attendance, including:

- establishing and ensuring consistent application of attendance procedures and data collection in its schools
- having appropriate policies and procedures to ensure its schools meet attendance-monitoring requirements

Our audit findings

KEY FINDINGS

- Non-attendance is accepted as the status quo at the division and its schools. Oversight of improving attendance results is deficient.
- Neither school administrators nor the division monitor or enforce compliance with the attendance policy requirements.
- Reasons for non-attendance and follow-up actions are often not documented.
- Schools have inadequate processes and controls to ensure attendance data is reliable; the division has not provided adequate guidance or training.
- Schools' monthly reporting of attendance to the division is too highly summarized to be useful.

We observed procedures for recording and monitoring attendance in the nine schools. Overall, problems involve a lack of consistency in procedures to take attendance, limitations in reporting attendance, and poor monitoring of student absences. Neither the schools we visited nor the division's central office had documented processes to take, record, monitor or report attendance. Nor did they have a software user manual.

Oversight of these processes has failed at the division and schools. Non-attendance is accepted as the status quo in schools and by the division. Higher expectations and accountability for attendance results are required. Also required is action to understand and document the reasons that students are absent and the actions to support and encourage those students to come to school.

Attendance procedure

The division's attendance procedure has specific requirements to identify students who do not attend school and provide guidance on what to do. The procedure is prescriptive in the actions to be taken, but it is not specific enough to ensure consistent enforcement by the division. For example, teachers are to "make every reasonable effort to inform the parent as soon as a student's attendance becomes a concern." The procedure does not define "reasonable effort" or "becomes a concern".

During our audit, the division began to review its attendance practices. It will consider revisions to its attendance procedure as part of this process.

Apart from the terminology problems, many school administrators and teachers we interviewed did not know the requirements. We saw no documentation that the schools or the division enforced compliance with them.

Student attendance data

Recording attendance

Teachers used various methods to record daily attendance data in the attendance software system. Schools have automated this system so teachers enter information directly into the database at the start of class. But most teachers we interviewed do not always enter data daily because of the demands of classroom management. They use a paper copy or another manual process. Because the system is not designed for this, there are no controls for review of manual attendance records or for retention of these documents. Discrepancies existed between the manual attendance sheets we reviewed and the information recorded in the attendance tracking system.

Some teachers or school administrators do not maintain manual attendance records past the current term. Whether teachers entered attendance into the program immediately or later, there are no processes to review or verify the data.

System controls

Systems controls are weak. The system defaults to students being present until a teacher logs into the system and enters actual attendance. Not all administrators we interviewed knew of system-generated triggers that can identify the difference between perfect attendance for the day and attendance data simply not being entered.

School administrators send monthly attendance reports to the division on the last day of each month. Teachers said this is when attendance for the month is caught up if necessary. There are no controls to prevent staff from entering or revising data for previous days.

Using attendance codes

Codes can be set up in the attendance software program to track reasons for absences. Some schools used a basic coding structure of present, late or absent. Others used various absence codes such as excused, unexcused, sick, medical, no bus or school closure. Neither individual schools nor the division has written guidelines for the use or definitions of codes, so there was no consistency in the coding within a school or between schools. If all schools used a standard set of codes and applied them consistently, the division would have improved data for analysis.

Missing data

At the end of the school year school administrators have to close the attendance data file. But in some cases the year-end close was not performed correctly, so archived prior-year attendance data was overwritten and, therefore, lost.

There were also inconsistencies in handling student transfers out of the division. In some cases, student attendance records were deleted rather than marked as inactive, resulting in the student's attendance record being destroyed.

Review and guidance by the division

The division does not have review processes at the school or division level to ensure attendance data are accurately recorded. There is no results analysis of monthly attendance registers or oversight of school recording and monitoring processes.

Support and training by the division

Teachers and school staff we interviewed had varying levels of awareness of the capabilities of the software program. Most indicated that if they received training, it did not meet their needs.

The division does not have a full-time resource person with expertise in the software program to support school or central office staff. The division contracts with a part time person who knows the software. The lack of organizational expertise in the software poses a significant risk to the division's ability to record and monitor attendance.

The process weaknesses we identified represent missed opportunities to provide reliable and timely data to explain attendance rates and to understand reasons for non-attendance. Weak controls around the input of attendance data and the detection of non-entry of attendance data increase the risk of inaccuracy, which may lead to the wrong decisions and a lack of action to improve attendance.

Monitoring student attendance

Following up on non-attendance

Teachers have to identify when attendance becomes a concern and contact a student's parent or guardian. In some schools, community liaison or administrative staff help teachers do this. Communication with parents or guardians or other follow-up actions was typically not documented so we could not observe the nature and extent of intervention. Many teachers could not give details of documentation on their follow up of student absences.

Some teachers we interviewed did not know they had to inform the principal when student attendance becomes unacceptable or students are absent more than 20 per cent of days in one month. The schools had no formal reporting mechanisms to ensure this reporting occurred. Teachers would just tell the principal.

Principals must work with the teacher, community liaison worker, parent/guardian, and/or the Local School Board Committee to improve a student's attendance. Again, these processes are informal and often not documented. Intervention was reported to consist of home visits and informal conversations with parents or guardians. Formal letters and other communication were rare. Because of the lack of documentation, school principals could not show the actions taken with specific students or report on results.

High school students absent for more than 30 per cent of a class can receive credit for that class only after a special review by the principal or superintendent. This requirement was inconsistently enforced. In cases where performance reviews reportedly took place, documentation was unavailable.

The division's policy requires administrators to tell the superintendent where local efforts have failed to improve a student's chronic non-attendance. However, administrators have not told the superintendent of any such students. The superintendent has not followed up with administrators even though monthly attendance reports indicate many students are over the non-attendance threshold.

Monthly attendance reporting

School administrators give monthly attendance reports to the division's central office. Reports include attendance registers by student for each grade. Division staff prepare a summary report for the superintendent with the average attendance percentage for each school by grades K to 3, 4 to 6, 7 to 9, and 10 to 12.

This highly summarized reporting makes it hard to identify potential anomalies or inaccuracies in the reporting. It does not have the detail to identify students at risk due to chronic non-attendance. More detailed reporting is needed to monitor school administrators' compliance with the division's attendance policy.

Enforcing attendance

Individual schools and the division have not enforced attendance requirements. Central office staff have been involved in student suspensions and expulsion hearings, but have not been asked and have not intervened to help schools with students whose attendance has not improved despite local efforts.

Although the superintendent is the designated attendance officer responsible to ensure students attend school, the superintendent has not referred any students to the Attendance Board.²⁰ The Attendance Board cannot enforce rules for federally funded First Nations students, so the board's processes cannot be applied to many of the division's students. Division staff also expressed concerns that the Attendance Board's quasi-judicial process is unsuitable for communities that still distrust the education system because of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop.²¹

The department has guidance on steps for school jurisdictions to take before requesting a hearing with the Attendance Board. These include identifying factors contributing to the student's non-attendance, steps taken to monitor attendance, development of plans and strategies for improvement, and documenting results of these actions. The division's processes do not create the documentation required to request a hearing.

The division must develop a more culturally responsive approach to encourage and support good attendance and to enforce compulsory attendance in cases where this is the last resort. In 2006 through 2008 the Edmonton Catholic School Board and Edmonton Public School Board ran a pilot partnership with the Centre for Race and Culture using attendance circles as a more culturally appropriate alternative to the Attendance Board. Results suggest the approach worked.²² Schools in Fort McMurray

²⁰ Department records indicate that since 2009, Northland has initiated an attendance board hearing for one student.

²¹ The term Sixties Scoop refers to the removal of many Aboriginal children from their families into the child welfare system between 1960 and the mid-1980s, in most cases without the consent of their families or bands.

<http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/sixties-scoop.html>

²² Aboriginal Attendance Circle Evaluation Report, Centre for Race and Culture, June 2013.

were successful in working with local Elders to establish an Attendance Circle to intervene with students with attendance problems.²³

The department and the division have an opportunity to show leadership in this area by drawing upon effective models to develop an innovative, workable alternative to support student attendance in cases where enforcement is necessary.

Implications and risks if recommendation not implemented

Without systematic monitoring and reporting on attendance, the division will not consistently identify and support those students with chronic non-attendance.

²³ First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education: Promising Practices in Fort McMurray, November 2013, Alberta Education, page 4.

SUMMARY OF RECURRING RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of key reports and studies

The Northland School Division Inquiry Team Report in November 2010 was not the first such report. Since the division's inception in 1960, there has been a major study or report about once every decade:

- Report of the Northland School Division Study Committee (December 1969)
- Report of the Northland School Division Study Group to the Minister of Education (July 1975)
- Report of the Northland School Division Investigation Committee (October 1981)
- Alternative Structures for Governance of Northland School Division #61: A Discussion Paper (Fall 1982)
- Early School Leavers in Northern Alberta: Workshop Report (June 1984)
- Report of the Northland School Division Study Team (1996)

Examples of recurring recommendations

The Inquiry Team Report identified 10 recommendations that we recurred in these reports and were still relevant in 2010. Four years after the release of the inquiry report, they are still relevant today, yet most have not been adequately dealt with:

1. The need to adapt the curriculum to the cultural background of the student population.
2. The need for more extensive teacher orientation with more focus on developing understanding of the cultural backgrounds of the students, with at least some of the orientation occurring at the community level.
3. The need for improved internal communications.
4. The need for parenting programs and for a more intensive pre-school learning experience for most students.
5. The need to build closer relationships among the schools, the parents and the communities and for schools to be more of a "community centre".
6. The need for improved teacher housing that allows for reasonable rental rates in the context of remote or isolated northern communities.
7. The need for the continued existence of a unique school system and for it to have a philosophy, mission and vision that recognizes its uniqueness, especially as regards the cultural background of the student population.
8. The need for the school system to have higher levels of support from other social agencies to assist in addressing challenges such as low student attendance rates.
9. The need for a governance structure that supports the principle of local control based on a democratic and representative electoral process while recognizing the need for an ongoing educative support system that enables governors to implement visionary, policy driven practices and avoid micro-management.
10. The need to capitalize on the potential of cooperation with post-secondary institutions that have a presence in the communities to deliver more effective and efficient senior high school programs.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

To better understand what is working and not working for families in the division, we held meetings in two communities, Wabasca—Desmarais and Gift Lake. We met with parents and caregivers, grandparents, students, former students, teachers, administrators, local school board committee members, Elders and other community leaders.

In each community we were greeted by groups interested in improving the education system for their students. They discussed what is and is not working and what could best improve attendance.

We are appreciative of the people who met with us and shared their time to help us understand their communities. We would like to thank those at Gift Lake School, Mistassiniy School, St. Theresa School, Career Pathways School (Outreach), Oski Pasikoniwew Kamik School, Northern Lakes College Wabasca Campus, Gift Lake Métis Settlement Office, Bigstone Cree Nation Administration Office and the Municipal District of Opportunity No. 17 Administration Office where we held meetings.

What did we hear from the community?

The over-riding message we heard from the communities was the critical importance of positive relationships. Some of the factors the community identified as impacting attendance related to areas beyond the division's or the education system's responsibility. The community recognized this.

All parties involved expressed a desire to improve the system for the benefit of the children and young people. They recognized that efforts by school staff and administrators, families and communities, First Nations, Métis and local government leadership, the division's central office, the department, industry and other agencies and organizations must be aligned and coordinated and focused on actions leading to student success. They described a holistic approach to supporting students.

The following is how the groups we met described a positive future for attendance within their communities:

- **Values—*encouraging, motivating.*** A positive future for attendance would include building self-esteem in the communities' students; positive support from peers, family, teachers and study groups; education that is geared to student needs, that understands and accepts diversity; and respects Cree culture and language. Successes are celebrated by showing pride in students' work and acknowledging the division's aspiring artists. The importance of education is shared and the communities trust the schools to nurture their children.
- **Programming—the communities wanted the division's education to be at par with the rest of the province; with less upgrading required.** Programming needs for special needs, higher level math and science, quality options, Aboriginal studies, sports and field trips would be met.
- **Environment—*caring, supporting.*** The communities described a welcoming and safe environment for its schools. Improved facilities with well-maintained spaces for elementary, middle school and high school students. This would include vocational training and outreach options, supported by strong technology, transportation and improved accessibility. Appropriate levels of support staff, administration and specialists are available.

- Funding—Many groups expressed a need for sustainable funding that would allow successful programs to continue, as there was a sense that good, positive programs were often discontinued as short-term grants or other funding ceased. Areas of need included libraries, sports equipment and training, additional programming options, afterschool care and daycare in high schools.
- Partnerships—*uniting, strengthening*. Based on the idea that team work, partnerships and shared resources will be important for a positive future for attendance. Health and wellness resources, mental health supports and social services supporting community based schools were identified. Volunteers providing fundraising, supervision and assistance with after school programs; industry working with apprenticeships, mentoring, environmental stewardship and role modeling.
- Healing—*cultural sensitivity, role modeling*. The communities envisioned a positive future where the cycle of negativity is broken. The link between the school board and community is re-established and the community voice is heard.