

# Highlights of the Board of Trustees Meeting

August 26, 2014



The Board of Trustees of Palliser Regional Schools held its first meeting of the new school year at Palliser Centre in Lethbridge Aug. 26.

## Parent delegation attends with questions

The board welcomed a group of parents to the meeting to share information about Palliser. The parents were part of a group that approached the board in late spring with a series of questions.

Board Chair Colleen Deitz opened the meeting with a presentation on the past decade in Palliser, including the board's decision to move away from site-based management. Under a site-based system, school funding was allotted based solely on student numbers, leaving the board no resources to devote to priority needs. The result was a system of have and have-not schools, with smaller schools caught in a downward cycle of fewer students, reducing staff and programs, then resulting in fewer students wanting to enrol.

Deitz said the move to centralized, needs-based budgeting gave Palliser more flexibility to address student needs. She said the division-wide literacy program is one example of how centralization has benefited students across the division because all schools are participating and have access to resources and expertise.

The result has been steady improvement in student achievement across Palliser over the past decade, and the ability to provide a broader range of program options to students in smaller schools.

Deitz said she remembers a time when schools in Palliser charged each other if students from one school attended a program at another school.

"They wouldn't even share a book without being paid," she said. "Now we have teachers sharing expertise. That decision has made our system stronger."

Parents sought clarification on Central Office levels. Deitz said with close to 1,000 employees, Palliser is a



Colleen DEITZ

"fairly large corporation" meeting the diverse needs of students and schools and attending to provincial demands and initiatives.

The province has a benchmark for administration spending and Palliser has consistently come in below that level while providing some of the best achievement results in the province, said Trustee Robert Strauss.

"The results you see are the result of very effective teachers, great leadership at the central office level and the board vision that 'good enough' was not good enough," he said.

Deitz encouraged parents to contact trustees with questions any time and to use school council as the best forum for sharing information and having questions answered. Trustees regularly attend school council meetings, and many councils have invited Palliser's administrators to their meetings to discuss issues or answer questions.

## International school safety expert applauds Palliser approach

Kevin Cameron, executive director for the Canadian Centre for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response, joined the meeting to discuss the importance of open systems, applaud Palliser's commitment to school safety and open discussions about partnership with the school division.

Cameron, who has worked internationally on identifying threats and providing support in the aftermath of crisis, helped develop the violent threat risk assessment protocol signed by Palliser, other southern Alberta school jurisdictions, law enforcement and other public agencies.

Cameron opened his presentation by congratulating the board on its move away from site-based management.

"Site-based management is based on the assumption that every school functions the same way," he said. "No two schools are exactly the same."

He said the way a school will respond in the weeks following a significant trauma "depends on the system's pre-trauma functioning."

Healthy, open, functional systems aren't free of conflict, he said. Human systems grow when there's a willingness to "agitate" the system and face and resolve conflicts, rather than avoiding them.

*Together we will ensure learning success for all students  
to develop their unique potential as caring citizens in a changing world.*

Cameron said Palliser has been doing well in its multidisciplinary approach to identifying and assessing violent threat risks. He asked the board to consider opportunities to work with him and his organization on research and promotion of best practices.

“We may be able to help more kids, schools and families than what you’re doing locally,” he said.

Chair Colleen Deitz said a starting point might be for Palliser’s board to recommend a presentation by Cameron to Zone 6 of the Alberta School Boards Association, comprised of 10 boards from across southern Alberta.

Superintendent Kevin Geitz thanked Cameron for his support of Palliser, including presentations Cameron made to local police and social agencies at Palliser’s office.

“Working with you is a pleasure,” Gietz said. “I’m really looking forward to seeing what we can do together in the future.”

## Barons/Carmangay Schools appreciated by students, parents

Director of Learning Cynthia Gietz joined the board to present data collected during a school review of Barons School and Carmangay Outreach School. Barons School, an early learning through Grade 6 program, serves as a feeder school to Carmangay, which serves Grade 7 through 12.

All the students come from the Low German-speaking Mennonite community and many come to school with no English skills. The students learn the regular Alberta curriculum in an atmosphere that respects their faith and culture.

Because many of the parents aren’t fluent in English, Palliser’s Low German Mennonite Liaison Worker Dan Doerksen helped provide translation services so parents could participate fully in the school review focus groups and surveys.

Overall, 76 per cent of students, staff and parents

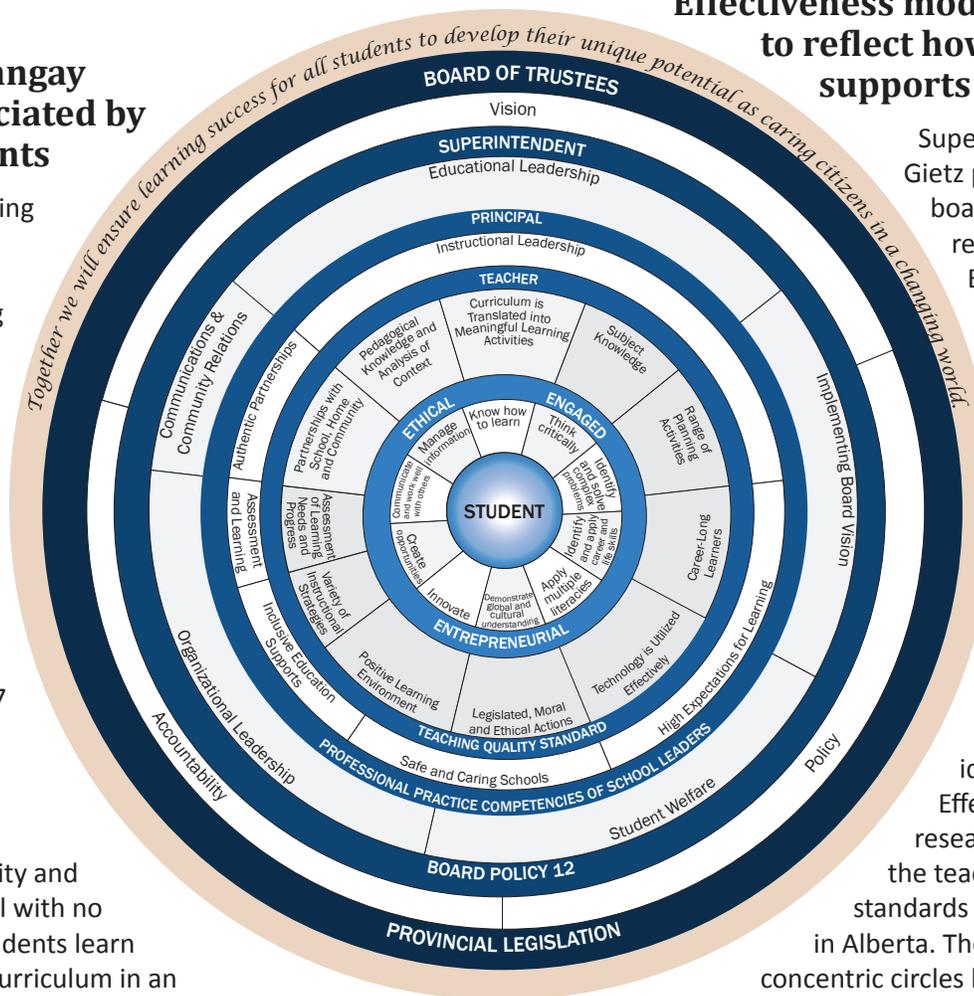
participated in the school review process.

The data collected through surveys, focus group discussions and observations found the schools’ strengths include respect for culture and faith, strong focus on literacy and learning, and appreciation for the opportunities provided by the schools.

Areas of refinement included more extracurricular and program options and more resources including gym equipment. There was a diversity of opinions on whether the school should use technology in the classroom. High school students indicated a desire for Spanish language and music instruction.

Overall, Gietz said the parents are overwhelmingly happy with the schools, respect for culture and welcoming atmosphere.

## Effectiveness model modified to reflect how Palliser supports students



Superintendent Kevin Gietz presented the board a draft of a revised School Effectiveness Model. The model was created several years ago and is used as part of Palliser’s school review process. It reflects the six correlates, or characteristics, of successful schools as identified through Effective Schools research, as well as the teaching quality standards for teachers in Alberta. The model of concentric circles had student learning at the centre.

Gietz said the draft version puts the student at the centre, surrounded by the teacher, the principal, the superintendent and the board. It adds Alberta’s new student competencies and reflects the language of Inspiring Education.

He sought trustees’ input and said he would also be presenting the draft to Palliser’s principals and vice-

principals to seek their input as well.

The model will be returned to the board at its next meeting with any feedback provided.

## **Byelection will be held to replace trustee**

The board reviewed provincial legislation regarding the resignation of a trustee. Joan Boras, elected in October 2013 in the Picture Butte area, resigned in early July.

The Board had the option to leave the seat vacant but discussed the need for the region to be represented. The next general election is not until October 2017.

To hold a byelection, the board must allow four weeks between nomination day and the election. Public notices of nomination date are required in each of the two weeks before nomination day.

The board set nomination day as Jan. 5 with the byelection to be held Feb. 2, in order to avoid having a campaign run through the Christmas break.

With Boras's resignation, there are now five trustees serving on the board. The remaining trustees discussed how they'll continue to represent the Picture Butte area until a new trustee is elected in the new year, including attending school council meetings.

The vacancy is in Ward 1, Subdivision 4, an area that includes the communities of Picture Butte and Iron Springs. The trustee was also the board's representative to Calgary Christian School in Calgary.

## **Minister denies request for transition funding to address enrolment decline**

The board received and discussed a letter from Education Minister Jeff Johnson, denying Palliser's request for transitional funding in light of a loss of 640 students in 2014-2015 as Glenmore Christian Academy reverted to private school status.

The board had sought the funding in light of Alberta Education's provision of "mitigation funding" to other school boards who had enrolment declines. The minister's letter said the intent was to protect boards "from an overall net decline in enrolment throughout the entire jurisdiction," from the loss of a school to private status.

Palliser had requested about \$1.5 million to maintain service levels, well less than the full per-student grant provided to 640 students.

## **Minister's request proved time consuming and fruitless**

Palliser staff devoted hours and paid legal costs in preparation for responding to a request from the Education Minister.

Associate Superintendent (Human Resources) Ken

Garinger provided the board details of the request, the investment of time and resources required and the eventual suspension of the request.

On June 26, just before the end of the school year, the minister asked for details of teacher-related incidents of unprofessional conduct and professional incompetence for a 10-year period from 2004 to 2014. The minister had said the purpose was to determine the process and expense related to dealing with such matters, to ensure students are protected and to improve how matters are handled.

The deadline for submitting the information was July 11, a short timeline complicated by the fact many school division staff were away for the summer break.

The minister then amended his request to cover just a five-year period, before suspending his request on July 9.

The board expressed frustration at the time and expense related to the request.

## **Literacy investment paying dividends for students across Palliser schools**

Palliser's investment in literacy has already made a significant difference to many young readers across the division.

Associate Superintendent (Education Services) Dale Backlin, who oversees the literacy program, shared data from 2013-2014 reading and comprehension assessments conducted on every students from Grade 1-6 across Palliser. Students in Grade 7 and up were also assessed if they were identified by the principal as needing literacy support.

Palliser uses Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment system to determine what reading level the individual student is at. An assessment in early fall gives teachers the information they need to determine what instruction will help the student progress to the next level of reading and comprehension.

Assessments are completed again in early spring, to determine if strategies have succeeded in moving the student forward and giving teachers time before the year ends to adjust instruction to better meet needs.

In the fall assessment, about one-in-four students were identified as needing serious intervention because they were well behind grade level expectation in reading. When retested in spring, that had fallen to one-in-five students. Backlin said the data also found consistent improvement among students who were approaching, meeting or exceeding grade level expectations.

Palliser's investment in the program is significant because elementary teachers are provided substitute teacher time so the classroom teacher can devote one-on-one time with each student to assess their reading skills.

Backlin invited trustees to attend a literacy symposium

Palliser is organizing for its Central Office administrators, principals and vice-principals Sept. 29-30 in Lethbridge. This will be the second literacy symposium organized by Palliser and featuring Palliser's own experts sharing their experiences and expertise.

### **Four schools to be reviewed this year**

Associate Superintendent (Education Services) Dale Backlin provided the board a look ahead at school reviews planned for the coming year.

Generally school reviews are conducted when a new principal is in his or her second year at the school. Reviews are planned at Jennie Emery Elementary School in Coaldale; R.I. Baker Middle School, Coaldale, Heritage Christian Academy, Calgary; and Huntsville School in Iron Springs.

School reviews involve the participation of students, staff and parents through surveys, focus group discussions, classroom observations and interviews with teachers.

Backlin said reviews are also planned of the Central Office departments of Technology Services, Facilities Services and Transportation Services.

### **Several students taking part in dual credit program**

Associate Superintendent (Education Services) Dale Backlin said eight or nine students from Palliser are taking part in a dual credit health care aide program offered in partnership with Lethbridge College. Students are able gain high school credit while working toward a college certificate. Palliser receives some funding for the

credits the students earn. The value of the program is the opportunity provided to students.

### **Four days set aside for Palliser's teachers to work in professional learning groups**

Associate Superintendent (Education Services) Pat Rivard updated the board on planning for Palliser's first division-wide collaboration day, scheduled for Monday, Sept. 15.

The day, one of four division-wide professional development days in Palliser, gives teachers from across Palliser an opportunity to work together in small learning groups. Rivard said each of the groups will focus on literacy and assessment for learning.

"At the end of the day we want to see that practice is changing as a result of our collaboration time," Rivard said.

The collaborative days are set for Sept. 15; Oct. 14; Dec. 1; and April 20.

### **Board approves move to new software**

The board passed a motion to transition to new software for human resources, payroll and finance services. The new software will be provided by SRB Education Solutions Inc. Corporate Treasurer Wayne Braun said Palliser will go live with the new system on March 1, 2015.

### **Next meeting: Sept. 16 in Lethbridge**

The next board meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, Sept. 16, at Palliser Centre in Lethbridge. The meeting starts at 9 a.m. and is open to the public.

