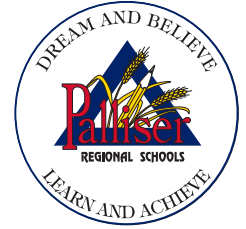


Highlights of the Board of Trustees Meeting

March 17, 2015



The Board of Trustees of Palliser Regional Schools held its regular monthly meeting March 17 at Palliser Centre in Lethbridge. Trustee Esther Willms was absent from the meeting. The board's next meeting is **April 14**.

First Nations Education agreements an issue for many boards

Palliser's efforts to reach a new education agreement with Siksika First Nation is one of many similar processes across the province between school boards and First Nations.

That was one of the takeaways from a meeting March 13 with Alberta Education and school jurisdiction officials from across the province.

Associate Superintendent (Education Services) Pat Rivard said Director of Learning Laurie Wilson attended on Palliser's behalf. The meeting was an opportunity to discuss draft standards for education service agreements between a school board and the Government of Canada or a council of a band, as defined in the Indian Act.

Rivard said the federal department, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, was not in attendance.

Participants reached general agreement in principle of the standards as presented.

Rivard said one board said it hasn't had a new education agreement with the band it serves since 1941. In Palliser, a three-year agreement signed in 2012 for the period of 2010-2011 through 2012-2013 was the first agreement since 1971.

Palliser Chair Colleen Deitz said she'd like to see the province negotiate all service agreements on individual boards' behalf. That would save each board from the time and resources of negotiating individually.

Palliser has a long-standing relationship with the Siksika First Nation whose students may attend Palliser's schools in Milo and Arrowwood.

Budget worst-case scenarios discussed

The Board discussed predictions about the upcoming provincial budget and its impact on operations.

The provincial budget will be announced March 26, and the province has said it's facing a \$7-billion fiscal challenge, largely due to falling oil prices.

One possibility is that school divisions will be facing a five-per-cent reduction in funding. In the coming year, teachers are also due a two-per-cent increase and a one-per-cent lump sum payment. If those contractual obligations are also not funded by the province, the cut is much deeper.

Recently Holy Spirit Separate School Division created a graphic showing the impact of a potential seven-per-cent reduction to its budget. In that division, the reduction would be the equivalent of 32 teachers or 84 full-time educational assistants.

Corporate Treasurer Wayne Braun said a cut of roughly seven per cent in Palliser would be the equivalent of 48 teachers in Palliser, based on average teacher cost. The number is presented just to help people understand the full impact of such a dramatic decrease in funding.

Board Chair Colleen Deitz said she's been encouraging people in her communities to contact their MLA to voice concern about cuts to education. The funding and the contracts have been decided by the province, and boards have no other significant sources of revenue.

Save the date: May 28 is the next division-wide stakeholder meeting

The board has set May 28 as the date for a division-wide stakeholder meeting in Vulcan. The meeting will be open to the public and each school community will be encouraged to ensure broad representation is present.

The last division-wide stakeholder meeting was held in May 2012, bringing together administrators, teachers, support staff, school council representatives, other parents, and student representatives from Division 3 (Grades 7-9) and Division 4 (Grades 10-12). That event brought together about 180 people for an afternoon of discussion about student success.

The board recently completed four regional stakeholder meetings in Coaldale, Picture Butte, Vulcan and Calgary, talking about Palliser and answering questions.

Literacy assessment and support deepens at high school level

Palliser's literacy focus is growing at the high school level with a focus on individual assessment that drives

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

explicit instruction in reading and writing.

County Central High School Principal Tracy Inaba and Calgary Christian Secondary School Principal Jason Kupery shared what this looks like in their schools, as both use the Ontario Comprehension Assessment toolkit to assess student reading level and provide strategies and skill instruction.

Inaba said the high schools needed an assessment tool that went beyond Fountas and Pinnell, a benchmark that measures up to a Grade 8 reading level. County Central took part in a pilot project of the Ontario Comprehension Assessment last year to positive reviews of the tool. However, the pilot didn't include an analysis of the data and determination of next steps. That is now occurring this year.

County Central Grade 9 and 10 students were assessed using the OCA tool at the end of November and Early December, Inaba said.

The teaching staff devoted their professional learning collaboration time to examining rubrics and exemplars and analyzing the data collected.

The staff determined the key areas for improvement such as getting students to activate their background knowledge, make inferences, and visualize and make connections. There's now a school-wide effort to encourage students to make connections. Inaba said she's already hearing it in conversations among students as they connect information from one subject to information from another.

A next step will be to assess students again in late April, looking for what's made a difference to student literacy.

Kupery said the Ontario tool has also been well received at Calgary Christian Secondary School.

"It's really helped us glean what kids are understanding," he said.

During staff professional learning sessions on Fridays, teachers are sharing what they do in their own classes to encourage literacy. On the most recent Friday, literacy in Foods and Physical Education were topics. In Phys Ed, for example, literacy includes building understanding of the terminology of sports. Kupery said as a basketball coach, it's assumed kids understand what the key is or the baseline or what it means to travel. That's not always the case.

"Our teachers buy-in to literacy in the subject areas," he said. "Every teacher understands that. It's very universal."

At his school, a focus has been in helping students extend their understanding beyond the question being asked, and in encouraging students to think for themselves.

"How do we get kids to create their own knowledge, think critically and talk about what they're learning?"

Kupery said it's an ongoing process of encouraging students to share their ideas and opinions, rather than spitting out answers based on information provided.

Superintendent Kevin Gietz thanked Inaba and Kupery for their work to support student literacy and to use assessment information to meet student's needs.

"We're not just collecting data, we're using it," he said.

Managing aging equipment a key challenge in Palliser Tech Services

The Technology Services department in Palliser is extending the life of devices through a program of refurbishment and redeployment.

Director of Learning Tom Hamer said this past year, computers that were slated for replacement were also assessed for refurbishment potential, making more computers accessible for student use, including by those accessing online courses through Palliser Beyond Borders.

New desktop computers for teachers were leased, with the division moving to solid state drives for improved processing speeds.

In the first annual accountability report on Technology Services, Hamer reported on both the educational and technical aspects of the department to support school and student needs.

Supports for students have included purchases of iPads for students with identified needs receiving Program Unit Funding (PUF) and those identified through the division's Academic Wrap-Around effort. Hamer said the tech team is also working with principals of three elementary schools and the Co-ordinating Principal of Early Learning to test the effectiveness of iPad minis in kindergarten. At Trinity Christian School and Heritage Christian Academy, students are transitioning to one-to-one programs using Chromebooks, with financial support from the societies that support these schools.

Other highlights from Tech Services from the past year include the transition to a Google email domain, giving students and staff access to Google Apps for Education; a test of Google hangouts for one of Palliser's teacher collaboration days for an online meeting, reducing travel to an in-person gathering; and ongoing support for student learning needs through the use of assistive technology.

Hamer said an issue on the horizon is how to manage aging equipment, from computers to projectors and Smart Boards. He also expressed a desire to bring back a Technology Advisory Committee, with representatives from the board, Central Office, school administration and department staff.

New software to be implemented

Central Office staff will soon be moving to a new

software system for payroll, human resources and finance needs.

Representatives of SRB, the software provider, will be at Central Office the week of March 23 to lead training session. Many employees had been engaged in online training leading up to the transition.

Associate Superintendent (Human Resources) Ken Garinger said SRB will provide an overview of the new software during Palliser's final division-wide collaboration day April 20 which will be attended by teachers and administrative assistants. Other training sessions will be planned through the end of April for bus drivers, educational assistants and others.

Staff in Finance Services and Human Resources will be working in the new system starting March 31; payroll will follow on April 20.

One of the first changes employees outside Central Office will see is a move to online reporting of absences and requests for leaves starting May 1. A call-out system for substitutes is slated to go live Oct. 1.

Principal from New Zealand to visit Palliser on research tour

Palliser will have a special guest visit the division in early May.

Ken McLeay, a principal from Riverview School in New Zealand, has expressed interest in touring some of Palliser's rural schools, including colony classrooms, during his tour of the United States and Canada.

McLeay is the 2014 recipient of the ASB-APPA Travelling Fellowship, one of the most prestigious awards a primary principal can receive in New Zealand, according to a letter from the Ministry of Education in Wellington. The award allows recipients to travel overseas to investigate specific topics relevant to schools in New Zealand.

McLeay's research is on the effective appraisal provision for small and rural school principals. His visit to Palliser is tentatively booked for May 7-8.

Board continues to seek approval for outreach program in Calgary

The board unanimously passed a motion to apply to Alberta Education for permission to open an outreach school in Calgary.

The board had previously applied in 2014 and had been denied.

Trustees say they continue to see a need for an outreach program for Palliser's Calgary students who need an alternative to a traditional school setting.

Vice-Chair Don Zech asked that the vote be recorded to demonstrate the level of support from the board.



Superintendent Kevin Gietz talks with students at one of three schools the delegation visited in China.

Trip to China demonstrates potential for international and online students

Board Chair Colleen Deitz said her recent eight-day trip to China demonstrated the great opportunity for Palliser to provide an education to international students, whether in person in southern Alberta or online.

Deitz, who travelled to China with Superintendent Kevin Gietz and Associate Superintendent (Education Services) Pat Rivard said they visited three schools and met with representatives of Bela Education Group to further investigate the possibilities of a partnership program. Bela proposes students study in English for two years in China before travelling to Alberta for a third year of high school.

Deitz said one of the schools they visited had 3,600 students who live in dormitories and study from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or later. At one school, she had opportunity to meet with a principal who talked passionately about supporting learning success for all students, language that mirrored Palliser's philosophy.

She said there was considerable interest in Palliser's online school, Palliser Beyond Borders.

Gietz said students aren't legally obligated to complete high school. It's a choice. Students are tested before they're accepted, and classes are large, with 45 to 50 students. With the country's one-child policy, each child's parents and both sets of grandparents are highly motivated to give the child opportunities for success because their family's future hinges on that child.

Rivard said having Palliser board chair present at the meetings was critical because the Chinese respect the hierarchy of decision-making. There is also deep appreciation of Alberta's international reputation for an excellent education system and high interest in Palliser's results within Alberta.

Gietz said there's work remaining to ensure the program Bela is proposing would set up students for success in Palliser, and there may be potential for retired teachers to teach internationally in China.

Rivard said the Palliser delegation travelled as Bela's guests as the group made travel arrangements and took care of meals and accommodations.

Deitz said there's tremendous potential for Alberta to market its curriculum overseas. Palliser's international student program is only in its first year and is already self-sustaining.

Palliser's general financial health has improved in recent years

Corporate Treasurer Wayne Braun presented Palliser's financial reporting profile for 2008-2009 through 2013-2014, showing improvements to the division's financial health.

The document from Alberta Education shows Palliser's accumulated operating surplus has gone from a deficit position in 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 to a positive position, amounts that could cover 13 days of operation, less than the 16 days which is the average of all school jurisdictions in Alberta but higher than in Palliser's five previous years.

Braun said Palliser has also improved its assets versus liabilities ratio.

One challenge is the state of equipment and vehicles. In tight budgets, Palliser has focused resources on the classroom. Palliser's equipment is nearly 100 per cent depreciated, he said.

Braun said the 2015 provincial budget and 10-year financial plan being tabled in the Legislature March 26 is expected to bring cuts to school boards. In preparation for the budget, Palliser's senior leadership met with principals and vice-principals Feb. 26, holding round table discussions about services, programs and new revenue opportunities. A meeting with school leaders is also planned March 27, after the budget announcement, to continue the discussion. Individual meetings with school principals have also been held with Human Resources and Finance Services staff.

Board approves additional bus route

The board approved an additional \$7,400 expense from the transportation budget to add a bus route for Barons School effective March 23.

The board heard two of the three buses already serving Barons School are full, and with families returning from Mexico, they are potentially over capacity. Ride times on the two routes are 85 to 90 minutes long.

Service through the end of the year will cost \$7,400, and would come out of the projected \$12,000 surplus in the Transportation Services department.

Barons School is an alternative program serving students from Low German-speaking Mennonite families.

Three-year capital plan approved with change to final priority item

The board made a change to its 2016-2019 capital plan.

The first four priorities remain unchanged. Topping the list is Barons/Carmangay. The Barons School requires additional space and does not have any barrier-free classrooms or washrooms. Options to address this could be modernization of Barons or increased use of Carmangay School. Student population at Barons and Carmangay continues to increase. Priority 2 is mini modernization of Huntsville School, built in 1941, with an addition in 1958. Priority 3 is mini modernization of Coalhurst High School to address the school's cast iron plumbing system. Priority 4 is modernization of Kate Andrews High School in Coaldale to update the school and ensure the facility can accommodate the growth in student numbers now being seen at Jennie Emery Elementary School.

The previous capital plan identified upgrade of the gymnasium at Champion School as the fifth and final priority. The board accepted a proposal by Facilities Services to amend the capital, dropping the Champion project from the list and adding John Davidson School in its place. The Coaldale school is full and shares a building with PASS+, an outreach school. Enrolment at John Davidson School, an alternative program for Low German-speaking Mennonite students, continues to grow.

Corporate Treasurer Wayne Braun, who oversees Facilities Services, said the province's capital budget is likely committed for the next three years on new schools or modernizations that have already been announced so it's highly unlikely any of the priorities on Palliser's capital plan will be funded. Palliser is already working on a modernization of Noble Central School.

The new capital plan will also no longer identify continued lease funding to Brant Christian School, Menno Simons Christian School and Heritage Christian Academy as a priority. Nor will the plan seek new lease funding for Master's Academy and College, Calgary Christian Schools and Trinity Christian School. Despite years of advocacy by the board for lease funding from the province for all of Palliser's faith-based alternative programs, a recent meeting with the deputy minister on the issue and a subsequent letter from the deputy minister ends the discussion. The province will no longer provide lease support for Heritage or Menno in 2016-17.

Braun said Palliser's request for modular classrooms for Coalhurst Elementary School and Barons School have also been denied.