Student Support Services Review

Findings, Recommendations and Implementation Plan

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In Regina Public Schools, the inherent gifts of all people will be recognized and nurtured. "I Belong" means that all students will feel safe, accepted and valued.

To ensure the ongoing delivery of appropriate and responsive programs and services for students with special needs, School Administrative Services initiated a review of Student Support Services programs and supports.

Purpose:

The review process was intended to:

- Examine current prevalence rates and emerging trends for students with special needs in Regina Public Schools
- Examine the current Student Support Service program and service delivery model to identify strengths and areas for improvement
- Examine current research pertaining to program and service delivery models for students with special needs
- Examine changing provincial funding for students with special needs and its impact on programming in Regina Public Schools
- Recommend a program and service delivery model to enhance learning opportunities and outcomes for students with special needs
- Recommend a timeline for a staged and sustainable implementation process
- Seek input and feedback from stakeholder groups throughout the process

Vision

As a part of this process the Committee embarked on a visioning process and developed the following vision to provide direction for the review:

Through consultation and direct service delivery, we strive to work proactively to promote the development of effective, equitable supports at different levels of intensity that result in positive student outcomes. Whenever possible, supports will be provided in the student's home school.

Student Support Services Stakeholder Research: Executive Summary

In March 2007 the Student Support Services (SSS) Branch initiated a review of SSS programs and related service and delivery models. Through this process, a number of opportunities for improvement and gaps in service delivery were identified and a series of recommendations developed.

The review engaged a significant number of internal and external stakeholders in a series of face-to-face sessions, capturing their unique perspectives regarding program/service delivery. Internal and external stakeholders included groups such as: parents, current program partners, and agencies of interest outside the Regina Public School Board (e.g., Autism Resource Centre). Analysis of focus group findings identified a number of key areas of concern that have been synthesized into the following seven categories (note: order is not based on relevance or priority):

Communication:
To varying degrees, the majority of stakeholders identified issues concerning communication. Key issues included:
- Internal stakeholders reported feeling uninformed when it came to the implementation of government-wide directives and other new initiatives
- The strategic direction of the organization appeared to have little significance and/or relevance for front line employees
- Concerns regarding a perceived lack of consultation and validation of new concepts and ideas prior to implementation
- Communication regarding the SSS branch, its mandate, and role was identified as an area of weakness. Many external stakeholders (including parents) did not know what Student Support Services is or the full extent of the branch role.

Transitions:
Discussions surrounding transition management incorporated the movement of students between schools, between grades and classrooms, and into society. Typical stakeholder comments related to:
- Concerns regarding inconsistencies between teachers and schools and the individuality of approaches used.
- Inconsistency of case management and coordination of care for students. "Care" in this context refers to both academic and social needs.

Resources:
From a resource perspective, almost all focus group participants raised concerns regarding shortages in specific skill areas within schools (e.g., Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, Speech Language Pathologists, and School Counsellors). Other resource related concerns included:
- Regular classroom teachers shared concerns regarding inadequate teacher support for those dealing with students with Intensive Needs

- SSS challenges when attempting to meet the needs of a large population in a strategic manner. Considerable time is spent dealing with day-to-day 'fires' as opposed to adopting a planned approach to meeting needs over the longer term

Process:
Process inconsistencies between schools were raised by a number of stakeholder groups. Areas of concern were either specific to time periods during the student's school life (e.g., transitions), or related to general processes involved in delivery of programs and subsequent SSS support. To further complicate the concerns around process, accountability and ambiguity around lines of authority were also raised by several internal stakeholder groups. In many cases, the effectiveness of SSS program delivery was identified as being vulnerable to the level of support provided by school administration.

Information Technology (IT):
From an operational perspective, the most significant IT concerns raised by internal stakeholders were a perceived lack of support within the RPSB for existing tools in place as well as a lack of "end user" (front-line user) training. In addition, the issue of procurement was somewhat ad-hoc in nature. Feedback suggests that much of the technology in place was purchased as a result of an identifiable need put forth by an individual consultant or program area, as opposed to a program identified need. This type of process, although timely, was identified as creating significant issues in terms of training and operational support – as was evidenced by comments shared during meetings. A "best case" situation, would be one in which an organization has a clearly defined procurement processes specific to IT, that incorporates a defined corporate architecture.

Equity:
Equity issues were raised by a number of internal stakeholder groups. Analysis suggests that many issues could be linked to resourcing concerns raised previously. Particular areas of concern included:
- Perceived inequity in terms of student ability to access programs and services. Specifically, some program areas (e.g., Speech Language Pathology) rely on support available in the home in order to effectively implement a program for a particular student. In situations where support is absent and/or capacity does not exist within the home to provide support, there exists some prioritization of program delivery based on available support and the potential for student success
- For students and families experiencing poverty, other equity issues emerged because children may be required to move to schools outside of their home area to receive services. Providing food for children within community schools has been an effective tool to increase the potential for student learning, yet this support can become unavailable with relocation

Program Gaps:
Parent and teacher stakeholders alike voiced concerns regarding programs for students with very specific needs such as: Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), children with intensive health concerns, and those struggling with mental health issues. The general sentiment appeared to be that these students are falling through the cracks in terms of assessment and programming.

Stakeholders suggested that most often the students were placed in a 'best fit' program which necessitated further tailoring of the program in order to meet the students' academic and social needs. Both teachers and teacher assistants expressed frustration with a lack of support in addressing the complex needs of these students (e.g., tools and education).

A Survey of Current Research and Practice

In addition to stakeholder research, Dr. Len Haines, Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Programs and Research at the University of Saskatchewan, agreed to examine current research pertaining to program and service delivery models for students with special needs.

> This review of the literature was commissioned by the Regina Public Schools Student Support Services Review Committee (SSSRC) to address the question: *What is the current status of our knowledge about effective practices and related student outcomes in the field of special education?* The purpose of the review was to draw upon the research literature to describe special education trends in public education and their efficacy in enhancing learning outcomes for students with special needs. The product of this review was intended to provide one source of information to assist the deliberations and decisions of the Student Support Services Review Committee.

> The researcher built the review around themes generated by the SSSRC and through a scan of topics at the International Council for Exceptional Children 2007 annual conference. Primary considerations related to cultural perspectives and evidence-based practices were identified and discussed. The findings of the review addressed the questions: *What is the current status of our knowledge and emerging trends pertaining to program and service delivery models for students with special needs?* Within this mandate, the SSSRC asked that the literature review identify emerging trends in special education and provide directions for the next 5 -10 years. By far the most prominent direction has been the inter-related concepts of Response-to-Intervention (RTI), Evidence-based practices (EBP) and 3-tier models (3TM).

RTI is the practice of providing high quality instruction and interventions matched to student learning needs, monitoring student progress frequently to make changes in instruction or goals, and applying assessment data to make educational decisions. RTI focuses on early identification of learning and behavioural needs and the provisions of appropriate evident-based interventions in order to address skill gaps early to keep them from becoming larger issues. RTI is a school-wide prevention approach, the foundation of which is quality core instruction within the general education classroom. More intensive supports and services, academic and behavioural interventions, are provided to struggling students based on data collection and analysis. These support and services vary in intensity based on student need, and may be provided by a variety of personnel, including general education teachers.

The review also addressed the question, *What are the benefits and outcomes of educating students with special needs in inclusive settings?* Research on inclusive schools revealed a growing body of evidence showing positive outcomes in educational, social and emotional, and economic domains. Recent studies have probed the factors that characterize effective inclusive schools. Evidence-based practices were identified in the constituent service options of co-teaching, differentiated instruction, peer-mediated instruction and intervention, paraprofessionals, transitions and self-determination, parent/community involvement, collaboration and teams, and effective instruction. Emerging research evidence support the organization of evidence-based instruction in tiers of intensity based on core (universal) provision, strategies (targeted) intervention, and intensive intervention.

Based on the prevailing current research evidence and directions, the research recommends that *the Regina Public Schools adopt, promote, and support the inter-related practices of RTI, EBP, and 3TM.* Implementation will take commitment, time, and resources. RTI is a systematic team-based problem-solving approach that requires fundamental changes for most schools, while holding out the promise of better outcomes for all students.

SSS Review Recommendations

As part of the division's development of an Instructional Innovation Agenda:

1. Establish a three- year plan for staged implementation of a three-tiered model (Intervention First) of inclusionary support and intervention at each school

2. Implement a continuum of programming so that students will remain in their home school whenever possible:
   - Level One – Classroom-based supports
   - Level Two – Additional school-based supports
   - Level Three – Intensive congregated programming or increase of school-based supports
   - Utilize an assessment model based upon individual student needs and not categorical diagnoses
   - Increase the allocation of professional staff in Levels One and Two through the reallocation of existing resources

3. Describe the changing roles of staff in the implementation of the Intervention First Model

4. Design school-based professional development programs to assist staff in transitioning to new roles in the Intervention First Model

5. Integrate existing Reading Effects supports, Inclusion Facilitators, and Adaptive Instruction Facilitator into the Intervention First Model

6. Identify approaches within the Intervention First Model to ensure culturally relevant supports for First Nations and Métis students

7. Establish modified and stay-in-school programs in all high schools

8. Develop a proactive long term plan for English as a Second Language services and programs

9. Expand division partnerships with government and community agencies to better address the impact of poverty and social issues on student engagement and learning

Implementation Plan

Year One: 2008 & 2008-09
- Integrate Intervention First Model with division's instructional innovation planning agenda
- Fully describe the programming expected at each support tier
- Consult with staff and establish role descriptions for staff in Intervention First Model application
- Design professional development to assist staff in transitioning to new roles
- Support schools that want to advance aspects of the Model
- Review current special program structure with the intent of improving our ability to measure student success and identify ways to integrate into the Intervention First Model
- Establish and prepare demonstration clusters of schools to field test applications of the model for 2009-2010

Year Two: 2009-2010
- Initiate demonstration cluster schools
- Monitor and evaluate
- Refine applications as required
- Prepare for expanded implementation in 2010-2011

Year Three: 2010-2011
- Initiate expanded implementation
- Monitor, evaluate, and refine as required