

AR115425

Abid Mavani  
Fatality Inquiry Coordinator  
Civil Litigation  
Justice And Solicitor General, Legal Services Division  
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Edmonton AB T5J 3S8

Dear Abid Mavani:

Alberta Education carefully reviewed the three Fatality Inquiry Reports for the death of four young people (TDM, TCM, TMB, and DB) who died from opioid poisoning between March 2017 and September 2017. Death by opioid poisoning is a tragic social issue in Alberta.

The education system plays an important role in contributing to enhanced positive mental health in children and youth. Alberta Education is committed to supporting and enhancing the health and learning outcomes of all students. It is important for schools and communities to work together to promote mental health and focus on social-emotional competencies of children and youth. Proactive initiatives focused on health promotion and prevention help to decrease demands on more high intensity services and reduce negative outcomes for children and youth.

The *Education Act*, which is the legislation that governs schools and school authorities in Alberta, requires school boards to provide a continuum of supports and services that can be accessed by any student in a manner consistent with the principles of inclusive education. The act also requires school boards to ensure all students and staff are provided with welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and foster a sense of belonging. Students are better able to achieve success and a positive sense of self when schools are inclusive and support students to build healthy relationships with others, value diversity and demonstrate respect, empathy and compassion.

The Fatality Inquiry Reports indicate three recommendations that impact the Ministry of Education. The first recommendation states that all government ministries investigate and actively facilitate the operation of early intervention services in rural areas. Alberta Education accepts in principle this recommendation, and recognizes the need to work collaboratively with other ministries and stakeholders to ensure early intervention services are available in rural areas.

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In February 2020, the Ministry of Education released details of a new funding model to provincial school authorities, which came into effect August 2020. The goals for the new funding model are to drive more dollars into the classroom, protect our most vulnerable students, contain cost growth, allocate funding predictably, ensure rural jurisdictions are treated equitably and foster collaboration among school authorities to enhance outcomes for Alberta students. The new model will deliver more efficient and sustainable funding to the education system to ensure all schools in Alberta have adequate resources to deliver programs in an equitable way. While the government's goal is to help ensure school authorities can direct maximum resources into the classroom, individual school authorities continue to determine how to best allocate their resources.

The new funding model provides school boards with a Specialized Learning Support (SLS) Grant. SLS grant funding is comprised of three allocations: Multi-disciplinary Supports Allocation, Jurisdiction Composition Allocation and Student Wellness Program Allocation.

- The Multi-disciplinary Supports Allocation is provided for school jurisdictions to build capacity in evidence-based practices, such as trauma-informed practices. It further provides support for specialized assessment, helping teachers, educational assistants, and other professionals better understand and adapt to the unique needs of their students.
- The Jurisdiction Composition Allocation is provided to address the diverse needs of classrooms.
- The Student Wellness Program Allocation allows for psychological and social-emotional support, supports for loss and access to mental health workers, behavioral consultants and other wellness supports as needed.

Public school jurisdictions are eligible for the Program Unit Funding (PUF) Grant for two years for children between the ages of two years eight months and four years eight months who have been assessed and diagnosed with a severe disability or a severe language delay. Alberta is the only province in Canada that offers funding for education supports to children as young as two years eight months. We are strongly committed to our youngest learners, and this will not change.

In the 2020/21 school year, school boards received \$556 million in SLS grant funding. Through Budget 2021, government has added an additional \$40 million to the Learning Support funding envelope. This envelope now includes over \$1.35 billion to support our most vulnerable students, and includes grants like PUF and SLS. Alberta Education will seek to maintain the integrity and streamlined nature of the new funding model while addressing any inequities or unintended consequences of the new funding formula.

Alberta Education accepts in principle the second recommendation regarding training for professionals in brain development and trauma-informed approaches.

In Alberta's education system, professional learning is the responsibility of individual teachers and school authorities. Nevertheless, Alberta Education will continue to work with its stakeholders to explore options to support increased opportunities for learning for education professionals in trauma-informed approaches. Alberta Education recognizes that a variety of supports, resources and programming can be effective for different school populations and communities. For this reason, school authorities have the autonomy, flexibility and responsibility to determine what is most appropriate and effective for their students, staff and school community.

Alberta Education has developed a variety of related tools and resources to support schools and school authorities in their responsibilities to ensure students are provided with welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that promote students' mental health and well-being. These resources are available online at [new.learnalberta.ca/learning-info-hub](http://new.learnalberta.ca/learning-info-hub), on the new Student Learning Hub in the Education Supports section. These resources include information for educators on brain development and on the role of trauma-informed spaces to support all students, particularly those who have experienced trauma. We know that students are better able to achieve success and a positive sense of self when they are supported to build healthy relationships with others, value diversity and demonstrate respect, empathy and compassion.

Alberta Education is currently creating resources to support school and school authorities with implementation of a continuum of supports and services as well as strategies to support positive behaviour in schools through a trauma-informed approach.

Alberta Education develops *The Guide to Education: ECS to Grade 12* (available online at [open.alberta.ca/publications/1496-7359](http://open.alberta.ca/publications/1496-7359)) for the use of administrators, counsellors, teachers and other parties engaged in the delivery of quality education. It is consistent with the objectives and underlying principles of the *Education Act*, and contains key requirements and other information for the implementation of education programming and the operation of schools. The guide provides teaching and learning resources, including The Brain Story Certification Training. This free online course, developed by the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative, makes the science of brain development and its connection to addiction and mental health available to professionals and the public. The course is designed for those seeking a deeper understanding of brain development and its consequences on lifelong health.

The final recommendation to encourage school administrators to use the services of the Office of Student Attendance and Re-engagement (OSAR) when attendance issues first arise with a youth and prior to proceeding to suspension or expulsion is accepted by Alberta Education.

Alberta Education is committed to providing leadership and support to school authorities to intervene early with the goal of improving student attendance and re-engagement in learning. As attendance issues are often an initial indicator that a student is experiencing other challenges, early intervention is important in preventing chronic absenteeism. The OSAR provides support to school authorities to make all reasonable efforts to resolve attendance issues by focusing on universal strategies, early intervention and targeted interventions such as community conferences. School authorities will be encouraged to focus on engaging and re-engaging students and their families in a non-punitive way. Education is committed to identifying on-going opportunities to increase school authority awareness of the supports available through the OSAR.

The Alberta Teachers' Association has developed a new resource, *Alternatives to Suspension in Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning Environments: A Toolkit for Alberta School Leaders and Educators*, through a grant from Alberta Education. The resource, which is expected to be released later this spring, supports school leaders in determining when and if a suspension may be ineffective and/or harmful and when it may be necessary and/or purposeful. It offers ideas and resources that can be used to support students in developing new positive pathways of interactions in a school's pursuit of a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment. The resource also promotes discussion about the use of suspension and proposes alternatives.

The recommendations directed towards Alberta Education are intended to support early intervention, training and early indicators of trauma and its impact on children and youth. While Alberta Education alone cannot solely address these complex issues, we look forward to working collaboratively with other Government of Alberta ministries and our stakeholders to support all communities in addressing the issues related to substance use, including the use of opioids.

Sincerely,

*Original Signed*

  
Andre Tremblay  
Deputy Minister