

An Update on the Cost / Benefit Analysis

Of

Returning to a K-5 Elementary Model in Whitecourt

February 14, 2023

Background

In 2012 Whitecourt had two K-5 Elementary schools. Of the two elementary schools, one was seen as a preferred experience and it grew, while the other elementary school became smaller. To deal with the lack of balance, Pat Hardy was changed to a primary school serving K-2 while Central became an upper elementary school serving grades 3-5. Students would then go to Percy Baxter Middle School and continue on to Hilltop High School.

Since 2012 Whitecourt has altered substantially in size and, importantly, in layout. With an increased population in the area north of 49th Avenue, the two school regions of the “hill” and the “flats” are now balanced in need and socio-economic factors, and each can support their local elementary school.

Another shift that has happened gradually but with increasing volume is the level of need amongst the youngest students. This increasing trend, which has accelerated due to recent impactful events, has the potential to unbalance the primary school. While primary programs always bear the added weight of early learning, we have reached a tipping point where it would be beneficial for all students to have a more balanced system. Staying in one school for a longer period of time would also support the progress of students with challenges.

With this background in mind, Northern Gateway has engaged in a cost/benefit analysis of re-establishing Pat Hardy School and Central School as Kindergarten to grade 5 programs. This study has included an analysis by each department of the school division, construction of virtual test schools, consultation with staff and parents, demographic examination and population trend forecasting, and a survey of academic research.

It is the intent of the Division to complete information gathering and render a decision before the end of February.

The Format Being Considered for a Return to a K-5 Elementary Model

School Shifts

In the proposed realignment model, Pat Hardy and Central School would return to serving K-5 students. Pat Hardy would receive students from the urban “hill” area and rural Whitecourt. Central would receive students from the urban flats area, with the dividing line being 49th Avenue at the bottom of the hill. This results in a numerically even division of students and related needs.

School Choice

Northern Gateway offers a choice of schools when extra space exists. Since both Pat Hardy and Central Schools are close to full and would need to maintain appropriate space for new arrivals within their assigned community, it is highly unlikely that there would be extra space for students from outside of the school's area, at least in the short term.

Junior Kindergarten

Despite the name, Junior Kindergarten is not a regular NGPS program but rather a partnership run by an independent society. JK operates more like a daycare that requires special licensing and facilities. Because of these specialized requirements, space will continue to be made available at Pat Hardy for the JK program. After a period of settlement into the new model, we will revisit the location of JK with the society that runs the program.

Staffing

If a decision is made to return to the elementary model, a staff process will be designed by the Division with the input of staff and the Alberta Teacher's Association. Teaching staff will fall into three categories: those that don't need to move at all, those that move within a building, and those who switch buildings. Teachers' priorities, along with administrative considerations, guide the staffing of schools.

Sometimes we are asked the question if the change is to reduce staff and thereby reduce cost. There is no intent to reduce staff, and NGPS is fortunate to not need to seek cost cutting measures. Support staff positions, which are needs based, will likely be spread roughly evenly between the two schools. There are no consequential funding changes related to returning to an elementary model.

Facilities

Both Pat Hardy and Central School have design features to serve K-7 programming. When there was a switch to primary / elementary model, there were some alterations made at each building, but not many. To re-accommodate a K-5 program, some cosmetic changes would need to be made, such as lowering or raising cloak room hooks, some washroom adjustments, and playground right sizing. Much of this work is minor, and the majority of more significant work reflects regular upgrades of washroom spaces etc., that are planned for in the regular course of site maintenance.

Playgrounds differ between the two schools, with Pat Hardy's playground serving a wider age range while Central's playground is more upper elementary focused and would require some right-sizing additions. Upgrades to Central's playground to reflect the re-accommodation of primary would be done by the Division.

For facility upgrades, we can expect to spend between \$20 000 and \$50 000, though as noted above, this includes existing upkeep needs. The playground upgrade represents the largest capital related expense involved in the realignment at between \$100 000 and \$150 000. This upgrade will also serve the local community of families with younger children outside of school hours. The total capital expense for realignment is expected to be between \$120 000 and \$170 000 in one-time costs with no annual related costs.

Another cost item is the time that the re-organization will take including worker time to move equipment, tables, desks and other items. It is difficult to put numbers to this work because currently, we do not know how many teachers will stay right where they are and how many might move to a different location. Using previous changes as a model, we expect this cost to be somewhere between \$10 000 and \$20 000 including time for staff who require it to pack and unpack.

Transportation

The transportation system in Whitecourt and area is becoming more complex with the addition of the new Catholic school. Northern Gateway, through agreement, transports all students in Whitecourt and area. With no other alterations, there would be an increase of transfer routes and an increase in cross town routes depending on configuration and numbers at the newly built Catholic School.

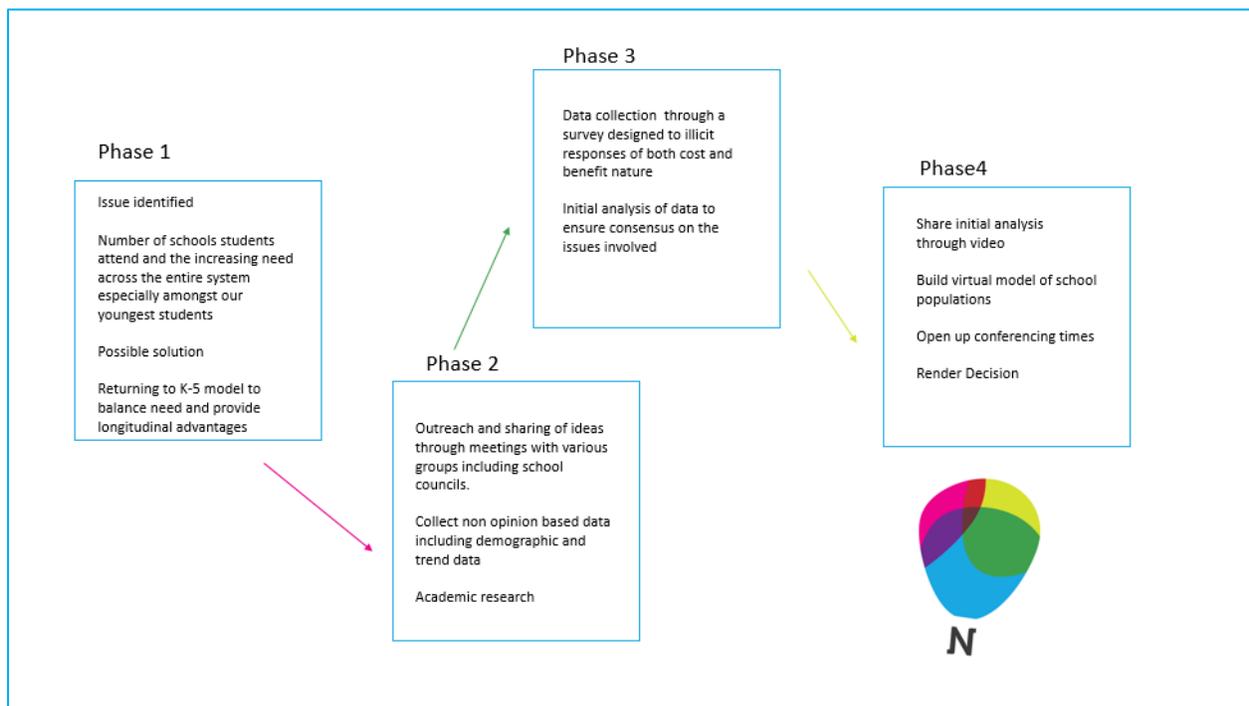
Realigning the elementary program would remove a considerable amount of the coming increase in complexity as a significant number of Northern Gateway students would no longer require transportation. Because of the need to service the new school site, students who do qualify for transportation will likely not see reductions in current ride times but, through realignment, they will not see the forecasted increase if the status quo is maintained. There will likely be a small reduction in needed buses through realignment, but there is no cost savings as funding mirrors need. However, with the challenges of recruiting drivers, any reduction reduces complexity and improves the viability of the system.

Students who are transported for safety reasons will continue to receive this service.

Update on Data Collected and Next Steps

Decision Making Model

The decision to alter the grades attending at a school is significant and challenging. We are in the process of ensuring that we have input about the benefits of returning to a K-5 model, but more importantly, that we have a wide and deep understanding of the concerns in making this change. The Division would not have embarked on data gathering if it did not see at least some reasons to make the change, so it is necessary to carefully collect and consider every reason to stay status quo. The Division is nearing the end of a 4 step information gathering process.



This is a complicated decision with many facets and the result won't be based solely on a majority voice but rather on careful consideration of the benefits of the change versus the cost of returning to an elementary model. A majority voice is a consideration but only one amidst many others. This is reflected in the survey questions which gathered both positive and negative information even from those strongly in favour of the change. Not everyone will agree with the decision as there are different ways to prioritize the costs and benefits, but the aim of this process is to ensure that a shared foundational understanding of the implications guides the final decision.

Survey comments

While the ngpsTALK survey remains open, the current data is being worked with to ensure its impact on any decision making. This is a difficult topic and NGPS is deeply appreciative of the quality of the survey responses and the thoughtful approaches which are plainly evident. While we live in a world that seems increasingly polar these survey responses demonstrate that Whitecourt residents should be rightfully proud of the ability of our town to consider multiple sides of a discussion even when our own opinions are strongly held. Thank you.

A release document of comments made during the survey is available from the NGPS website. Comments appear verbatim with the following exceptions:

- As the purpose of the survey was to collect cost/benefit data, repetitive answers have been noted but are not all included in the document as it would be unwieldy. Preference has been given to ensuring the bulk of comments against change are included even if there is some repetition.
- Comments which are not relevant to the current discussion because they cover other topics have been noted but are not included in the release document. Thank you to all those who took the opportunity to thank our staff for their contributions to our community.
- Comments have been edited to remove any specific identifying information of the contributor.

A full Analysis of the survey data is being completed, and it is beyond the scope of this report to provide commentary on every point raised in the survey and other data collected. Many of the points have two sides and are reflective of the nuance involved in large decisions. Below we will discuss a few of the main points that took on specific importance to us.

The reason to move to a K-5 model remains much the same as was expressed in 2012 by opponents of the then shift to a primary model -- Parents with kids in three different schools, the lack of longitudinal support, rapid changes of schools, the absence of older role models, or the added bussing. While these are all important ideas to consider the two key ones which began this discussion are the increasing need across our system but especially in our youngest students and the balance present in our community and likely to continue.

There are two comments focused on remaining in the present format which do not have an easy mitigating answer. First is the statement that we have just been through a pandemic and the introduction of a new curriculum and we don't need another change right now. Perhaps a shift should be put off until a few years down the road once things are more stable. Second, no matter what methods are used to move to an Elementary model, it will

mean the fracturing of some current friendship groups, and some students will need to move back to a school they have already “graduated” from, and some very young students will be making a change within the first year or two of their school career.

The survey and other information gathering also shows that the NGPS staff who would be involved in the return to an elementary model have mixed feelings, often conflicted between the observed need for change and a healthy respect for what our present system continually is accomplishing. It is a sobering reminder that the benefits of a change must clearly outweigh the unavoidable consequences that might result.

Next Steps

With the decision yet to be made we are approaching the end of data collection. Currently, we are completing the virtual modelling of the school populations to ensure we have a nuanced understanding of the impacts of change at a classroom level. We will be releasing a video with a summary of information to date and offering evening times available for people to sign up for more personalized conversations. We will also be completing our staff rounds and revisiting key comments with administration.

It is the intent of the Division to render a decision before the end of February and, to shortly thereafter, release a transition framework if necessary.