



Media Release
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Accessibility is Critical for Learners in School District 22 (Vernon)

Each year School District 22 (Vernon) and the Student Support Services Department, in conjunction with the Maintenance Department, undertake ongoing accessibility initiatives. The purchase of equipment, materials, and building upgrades are all part of our process to continually work towards improved accessibility for students and families with diverse needs.

The school district Occupational and Physiotherapy Team (Brittany Weber, Danielle Galbraith, Louisa Cotton, and Karie Farrer) has taken the lead on several of the initiatives that work towards the improving accessibility within our buildings. Examples of these initiatives include specialized equipment purchased to provide modifications to school washrooms across the district to ensure accessibility and safety. Accessible washroom equipment has included items such as: adjustable change tables, toilet step stools, toilet positional support systems and adapted toilet seats. This specialized equipment, required for washroom accessibility, comes at the cost of just over \$21,000.

Larger structural accessibility items for washroom upgrades occur through the school district Facilities Department. At BX Elementary school, a recent facility extension and upgrade provided accessibility accommodations including proximity “no touch” faucets, soap, and paper towel dispensers which allow students with reduced hand function to increase independence when washing their hands. Another example of an accessible washroom upgrade has taken place at W.L. Seaton Secondary where a shower stall was revamped to provide access for a wheelchair and Hillview Elementary has also undergone a recent substantial accessible washroom upgrade.

School District 22, Director of Facilities, Archie Stogianos, reports that \$340,000 in accessibility upgrades have occurred in schools over the last several years. The facilities department has been involved with the upgrading of accessible playground equipment, instillation of ramps, stair lifts and upgrades to ramps to allow wheelchair access. Other initiatives include the extension of sidewalks to allow access for wheelchairs and accessibility upgrades. Future planning consists of partnering with the Student Support Services Department to continue the accessible upgrades to school playgrounds.

For use within classrooms the School District Therapy team looks at customized therapeutic seating solutions to enable children to learn in a variety of seated and standing positions. Purchases for in class support have included examples such as: high/low seating base systems, standing desks, height and angle adjustable desks, wheelchair accessible classroom desks, floor chairs and specialized cut out tables. The purchase of this equipment cost \$6,600 over the past three years.

Providing access to students also requires physical space where students are able to regulate. Regulation tools are provided to assist children to obtain an optimal level of self-regulation for learning. These tools may be used in a designated regulation space or within the classroom environment. Over the past three years, purchases have been made including: Yogibo seating systems, specialized flooring, calming lights and light filters for existing lights, yoga mats, crash mats and gym mats for wall coverings. Materials within the sensory spaces such as trampolines, punching bags, heart rate monitors, Bluetooth speakers, and weighted sensory balls for heavy muscle work. The total cost of these sensory rooms and tools for the classroom have added up to approximately \$30,000. A recent example of an initiative is the movement lab, a purpose-built space, at Mission Hill Elementary school, that provides students with experiences to stimulate and develop their sensory and motor systems. The program is in its early stages of development and is being well received by staff and students.

The Brain Bikes Program within School District 22 promotes a student's ability to 'Move to Learn.' Bikes are primarily placed within the classroom environment to allow a student to self-regulate while engaging in classroom learning opportunities. Adapted trikes have also been provided across the district to support learners who may not be able to ride a bike or have the strength or stability to sit on a stationary bike. The School District has upgraded two of the adapted trikes in recent years at a cost of \$5,000. Currently, there are 53 Brain Bikes within schools. Twenty-three of these bikes have been purchased by the district, and the remainder of the bikes have been purchased through working with the local Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) and our community organizations. The cost for Brain Bikes and Adapted trikes is approximately \$40,000 (\$15K district purchase, and \$25K school and PAC purchased).

To support fine motor skill development, fine motor activity bins were created and distributed to all kindergarten classes in the district. The District Occupational Therapists provided training on the stages of development and how to incorporate activities into classroom learning. Small aids such as pencil grips and adapted scissors allows students to access their classroom learning tools and help them to highlight their talents. Feeding aids are provided at school to promote eating independence and safety. The cost of the fine motor initiative over the past 3 years is approximately \$4,000.

The equipment in SD No. 22 that supports students with Visual Impairments is varied. Many students have benefitted from the use of specialized technology such as iPads, computers, braille equipment, magnification devices and lighting options. This equipment is key for the student's success in the classroom. Summed up by one student, Cashus Chisholm who noted, "I think I now have most of the equipment I will need to learn about to be successful as an adult with a visual impairment." Although the list of equipment varies per student, the benefit to these students is irrefutable, without it and the support of our District Braille-Vision EAs, learning to be independent in the classroom and community would be impossible.

Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Janene Seabrook, notes recent purchase of equipment and systems for accessibility at a cost of \$10,850. In the Spring of 2021, the school district purchased seven *Audita Sound Field Systems* to provide students on our Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) caseload access to the curriculum. The *Audita* systems are portable, user friendly, and have superior sound quality. They provide an improved signal to noise ratio for all students in the class. DHH students are more able to block out background noise and access the teacher's voice with the use of a sound field system. One Elementary grade seven DHH student commented that she appreciates her teacher using the system because it reduces the effort required for her to access instruction. Reducing listening fatigue allows DH&H students to use their energy for learning. The *Audita* systems provide students with a greater opportunity to access communication from the classroom teacher.

This school year the district hired two DHH Signing EAs (Education Assistants) to offer visual language support to DHH students. Visual communication provides DHH students with greater access to the communication environment and helps students to develop a strong sense of identity. A DHH student may be the only student with a hearing loss in their school. Our DHH Signing EAs are role models who help students to see someone like them. Offering DHH students an opportunity to become bilingual improves literacy and supports the development of critical thinking and complex reasoning. Our DHH Signing EAs offer visual language (ASL) instruction to both deaf and hearing students in elementary classes. Students are motivated to participate and eager to learn new signs to communicate with each other.

The school district Speech and Language Pathologist team (SLPs) work to ensure we have an accessible and inclusive environment for all students who rely on Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). AAC is required for many of our students in the district for their primary mode of communication as they are non-verbal, limited verbal, use echolalic speech, or are highly unintelligible.

Several accessible and inclusive initiatives have been organized through district Speech Language Pathologist, Leah Clarke, such as: Portable Outdoor Communication Core Boards. Low-tech AAC boards allow our AAC users to always have a voice. While most of our AAC users use high technology speech generating devices with robust vocabularies to communicate, low-tech AAC always has a place, particularly when a student is outside in poor weather (e.g., rain/snow), in a swimming pool/lake/bath, when their device battery dies, or if their device breaks down. These low-tech options also allow peers and adults to model and learn about the AAC user language as well. Our Portable Outdoor Communication Core Boards initiative allows many schools in our district to utilize a portable 3'x4' AAC board on a portable sign that has the same vocabulary/symbols as most of our students' high-tech devices for use at the playground, in the gym, or wherever appropriate for our AAC users and their peers to use. Not only do these boards help allow our AAC users to communicate in all settings/situations, but they also build awareness, acceptance, and inclusion of all types of communicators. These boards will be out in the schools soon!

With Ellison Elementary School's new accessible playground in the works, School District 22 plans to post a large permanent AAC core board with braille in the playground and small AAC boards posted on the actual playground equipment at that school. This not only provides a low-tech option for our AAC users to access while they are playing outside and AAC inclusion, but also represents, and is inclusive of, our visually impaired population in the district by having a braille component to the AAC boards. Students with visual impairments can use the boards, and everyone else can learn about visual impairments and using braille, too.

School District No. 22 Vernon reports that over \$500,000 has been spent on accessibility initiatives over the past three years. Supporting students with diverse needs is a priority as well as making ongoing improvement to accessibility within our schools.

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