Saskatoon Public Schools

Report into the death of Ahmedsadiq Elmmi,

Student at École Dundonald School, September 11, 2017
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This is a report on the school division’s investigation into the death of a kindergarten student at École Dundonald School, on September 11, 2017. The report has been completed by members of senior administration at Saskatoon Public Schools.

Background

Ahmedsadiq Elmmi (Ahmed) was a five-year-old boy who was registered by his parents with Saskatoon Public Schools on June 28, 2017. He was to attend Kindergarten at École Dundonald School commencing in September 2017. His family was living in Prince Albert at the time where the student was attending preschool. The family informed Saskatoon Public Schools that Ahmed displayed “autistic symptoms” although he did not have a diagnosis of autism at that time.

École Dundonald School is an elementary school located at 162 Wedge Road in Saskatoon, which opened in 1987. As of September 11, 2017, it had an enrolment of 495 students. This was a decrease from 740 students in June 2017 largely due to the opening of Ernest Lindner School in neighbouring Hampton Village.

The student’s parents expressed concerns about his safety to staff at École Dundonald School. He was determined to “escape” from any building that he was in and was fascinated by water and traffic. The student’s preschool teacher in Prince Albert explained that if he went outside for recess, he would need to hold onto an adult’s hand at all times. His mother explained that he did not go outside without holding onto her hand and his preschool teacher confirmed that was the preschool's policy as well.

Upon receiving this information, staff at École Dundonald School started planning for the student’s arrival in September. In August, Ahmed received an official medical diagnosis, which allowed him to be placed on the Intensive Supports list for École Dundonald School. This would allow an educational assistant (EA) to be assigned to Ahmed one-on-one, starting on his first day of school.

A team comprised of staff from École Dundonald School and a consultant from the school division’s Student Support Services branch worked over the summer to develop a safety and education plan for Ahmed prior to his arrival at school.

The student’s first day of school was September 6, when he attended for the morning only in what is known as a ‘staggered start’ day for Kindergarten students. The student’s teacher described this morning as being “extremely difficult for Ahmed to be in the classroom”. He was very active and ran away from his EA whenever he got the chance. He went out for recess with an EA who held his hand during the recess period. Ahmed was picked up by a worker from his daycare centre at the conclusion of the morning.
Ahmed’s first full day of school was September 11. He had an EA assigned to him during the classroom period, and was then transferred to another EA to supervise him during recess. The EA was instructed to hold Ahmed’s hand throughout the recess period. She stated that she held on to him tightly and he twice tried to get away. On the third try, he did get away and ran to line up to go on the slide.

Ahmed’s teacher was also on the playground during recess. She recalls scanning the playground twice and seeing Ahmed holding the hand of his EA. The third time that the teacher looked around and saw the EA, Ahmed was not with her. The teacher ran over and asked where he was. The EA replied that she had let go of Ahmed to allow him to go on the slide, which the school had been advised was one of his favourite things to do.

The teacher immediately alerted the other playground supervisors to look for Ahmed and described what he was wearing. The recess bell rang and students started to re-enter the school. The teacher saw the principal and alerted her that Ahmed was missing. The teacher called 911 and reported that Ahmed was missing. She gave them a description of what he was wearing, his physical description and that he liked to run onto the road or into water.

It is unclear precisely how much time elapsed between the time Ahmed became separated from his EA and the search for him began, but it is estimated that it would have been less than five minutes. There was initially some confusion as to what Ahmed was wearing, as some staff members thought he was wearing a red safety vest. This was corrected by the kindergarten teacher who explained that he was wearing a navy blue puffer jacket and a dark shirt. Staff members dispersed throughout the area surrounding the school and into the community. Two teachers and two EA’s searched the pond area and one teacher and EA found Ahmed face down in the pond. They commenced CPR on Ahmed. The EMTs took over once they arrived on the scene.

Ahmed was transported to hospital, but he could not be revived, and passed away.

**Development of Safety Plan for the student**

**Information from parents**

On August 14, 2017, the student’s mother confirmed with the school that Ahmed had received a medical diagnosis and the doctor would be faxing a note to the school. The family had contacted support services in Saskatoon and were in the process of finding a family doctor in the city. Ahmed’s mother also shared some helpful tips on the supervision of her son – he must be holding an adult’s hand at all times except when he is sliding down the slide which is one of his favourite things to do. She also shared some of his interests that may help to calm him down.
Work of school team and consultant

Over the summer, the school resource teacher worked closely with the principal, vice-principal, kindergarten teacher and special education consultant to develop a plan to transition Ahmed to school. The classroom teacher spent considerable time planning for Ahmed’s arrival and arranging classroom spaces to meet his needs. Work was commenced to get Ahmed a 1:1 EA even prior to his diagnosis and was confirmed once his diagnosis was in place.

A number of recommendations were made to consider Ahmed’s safety:

- Discussion with the division’s Facilities department regarding a latch on the classroom door.
- Developing stories to tell Ahmed regarding safety in and around the school.
- Placing him as far away from the door of the classroom as possible and placing items in the area such as a trampoline chair that would motivate him to stay there.
- Putting a red stop sign on the door of the classroom and teaching Ahmed to “stop”.
- Putting a bright vest on him at recess.
- Informing all staff to watch out for him at recess.
- Teaching him to walk safely with an EA.
- Sliding a box of materials or a chair in front of the door to slow him down.

Recess Supervision Plan

Playground supervision in the division is guided by Administrative Procedure 350 – Supervision of Students. Each school develops a supervision plan based on the number of students in their school along with such factors as playground configuration, number of playground apparatuses, entrance/exit doors, and the presence of any trees, hills, streets or alleys surrounding the school. In addition, arrangements are made to supervise intensive support students in the interest of their safety while on the school grounds. Recess supervision is considered a requirement of all teachers. School administration develops an annual plan that ensures that this workload is spread evenly amongst staff.

École Dundonald School

On September 11, 2017 there were eight teacher supervisors scheduled on general recess supervision. They were deployed at various locations around the school: three at the creative playground (where kindergarten students were); two in the senior student end; one in the tarmac area; one in the senior boot room; and one in the rink area. This was a similar number of supervisors that the school had in 2016-17 when there were considerably more students in the school.
The kindergarten teacher was also out on the creative playground area as an unassigned supervisor. There were an additional 12 adults (11 EAs and another teacher) supervising intensive support students outside of the school building.

**Comparison to similar-sized schools in division**

A review was made of seven other schools in the division with similar student enrolments. Comparisons are not necessarily straightforward as the factors which determine the number of supervisors varies by school.

Student enrolment numbers in the other schools ranged from 441 to 554 students. The number of adult supervisors on recess supervision in these schools on the morning of September 11, 2017 ranged from 10 to 18 with an average of 12 adult supervisors per school. This compares to a student enrolment of 495 students and 21 adult supervisors at École Dundonald School.

**The Pond**

The pond where Ahmed was found is located on city property approximately 100m on a downward slope from the school playground. This was initially a dry pond and was converted to a wet pond around 2005. There have been community consultations regarding this pond, which at various times have included past principals of Dundonald School. The full history of these community discussions is not the focus of this report.

A review was undertaken of the Dundonald Occupational Health and Safety Committee minutes for the years 2009-2017. There was no documented discussion of the city pond found in these minutes.

**Other Investigations**

**Saskatoon Police Service**

Members of the Saskatoon Police Service attended École Dundonald School on September 11, 2017 as a result of the 911 call. They interviewed and took statements from a number of Dundonald staff members. On September 13 the school division was notified that the police had closed their investigation and handed their files over to the Office of the Chief Coroner. The police informed the school division that no charges were to be laid as a result of their investigation.
Coroner’s Office

The Office of the Chief Coroner of Saskatchewan is charged with investigating all sudden, unexpected and unnatural deaths in the province in order to improve the health, safety and quality of life for the citizens of the province.

The school division will review and consider any recommendations provided to us by the Office of the Chief Coroner in conjunction with implementing our own recommendations.

Saskatchewan Children’s Advocate

Director of Education Barry MacDougall contacted the office of the Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth and invited them to undertake an independent investigation into the death of the student. The school division has co-operated with the staff of the Children’s Advocate throughout their investigation.

Conclusion

Ahmed’s death was a tragedy of unfathomable magnitude. The school division is deeply sorry for the family’s loss and that it occurred while their child was under the school’s supervision.

From the date that the school was made aware of the student’s registration in late June right up to the night before the tragic incident, the staff of École Dundonald School along with support from the division’s Special Education Branch worked tirelessly to develop a safety plan for Ahmed. Planning continued throughout the summer while these employees were on vacation. Those tasked with developing the safety plan ensured that everyone who needed to have information were provided with important data about Ahmed and the planning being done for him. The school felt confident that they had a solid safety plan in place for Ahmed’s arrival at school on September 6 and updated the plan after his first day of school.

Unfortunately, in the end the plan was not executed to perfection. Ahmed ended up in the lineup for a slide at recess without an adult holding his hand to restrain him from running. That was the last that was seen of him until a search of the surrounding area found him in the pond. This tragic event happened over a very brief period of time, and it is the responsibility of the school division to learn from this event and to consider what precautions can be recommended in the interests of student safety, as it moves forward.
**Recommendations**

While it cannot be said that the following recommendations would have prevented the tragedy that took place on September 11, 2017, they are intended to build upon current practice within schools and to provide consistency across the division.

1. The division must develop a safety plan template to address the transition of the most critical intensive support students into the division. This would be completed at the transition meeting with the family prior to the entry of the student to the school and would be shared and explained to parents prior to implementation. This plan should be reviewed as necessary when needs arise.

2. In cases where all elements of the safety plan cannot be fully implemented, the entry of the student to the school should be delayed or a graduated introduction to the school considered.

3. Kindergarten students should have recess at an alternate time from the rest of the school until these students have become acclimatized to being in the school/playground setting.

4. Specific plans need to be made for students who are considered to be ‘runners’. The use of reflective vests, gait belts or tethers should be considered as part of the safety plan for these students.
   
   a) The use of restraining devices should be seen as a step in the transition to independent movement and must only be implemented in consultation with parents.
   
   b) When the staff believes a restraint device is the only way to ensure a student’s safety and the parents do not agree, alternate arrangements should be made for the location and/or time of the student’s recess and lunch hour.

5. The safety plan for ‘runners’ must be shared with all staff members of the school, including substitutes, so they are alerted to the possibility of a student attempting to run from the playground. Consideration should be given to posting pictures of these students in the staff room and/or the staff portal.

6. The challenge posed by ‘runners’ in classrooms may require schools to control egress from the classroom in special circumstances. This should always be done in consideration of broader safety issues for all students and staff and in consultation with relevant authorities and bylaws.

7. If an EA working with a critical intensive support student is absent, either a) the EA schedule should be altered to have a regular contract EA work with and supervise that student rather than a substitute EA, or b) the principal should ensure that the substitute
EA is familiar with all relevant requirements of the student.

8. The division should consult with the City of Saskatoon regarding future planning, design and construction standards, physical barrier options, maintenance aspects, education and awareness strategies, signage proposals, and recreational use guidelines of park areas adjacent to schools.