

Presentation to Capital Region Caucus - June 25, 2014

Thank you for the opportunity to come and present to Capital Region Caucus. This opportunity means a great deal to charter schools.

I would like to start by thanking Capital Caucus for its vision in Education and for its support to charter schools.

Our thank you needs to go back nearly 20 years or so to the early 1990's when your government became concerned about the state of education and commissioned a report to study education reform. The report "Charter Schools: Provision for Choice in Public Schools" found the absence of competition as the primary reason for "the failure of public schools to provide the level of excellence in education necessary for success in an increasingly competitive society". As a result in March 1994, then Minister of Education Halvar Jonson introduced charter legislation as an amendment to the School Act. Choice was thus given to Alberta families and charter schools became part of the education landscape.

Visionary education reform continued when in 2008 Premier Ed Stelmach put forth the mandate to our current Premier, then Minister of Education Dave Hancock to lead an initiative that would create a long-term vision for education in Alberta. Minister Dave Hancock understood the weight of what he had been mandated with and that is reflected in his statement "*We have an excellent education system today where people come from all over the world to take a look at what we're doing now, but we cannot rest on our laurels. We need to build the education system for tomorrow*".

The 22-member steering committee that now Minister of Education Jeff Johnson was a part of delivered what we all have come to know as the Inspiring Education report, the report that become the basis for Bill 3: The Education Act.

This report not only has generated the new Education Act and supporting Regulations to be proclaimed in September 2015 but it has also been the springboard for important initiatives such as the Task Force for Teaching Excellence report. This report with its recommendations and valuable input from other educational stakeholders will guide government in ensuring the roles and responsibilities of teachers and educators support flexibility, innovation and learner-centred teaching that will allow students to develop the skills and knowledge they need to become engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with entrepreneurial spirits.

Your government over the last 20 years has worked diligently to set the educational stage for our students of the future to succeed in the world we now live in, one which changes at record speeds. Albertans thank you for this incredible work.

Charter schools want to also thank you for allowing us to be a part of Alberta's educational landscape and provide choice in public education. The amendments to the Charter Schools Regulation in 2012 now enable the Minister of Education to grant 15-year charter renewals to charter schools that meet the additional criteria set out in the 5-year charter renewals.

We also thank you for the work that is currently underway to assist us in our concerns in our ability to secure long term access to facilities and control the buildings we occupy with regard to facility enhancements and maintenance. Currently, Minister of Education Jeff Johnson is in a collaborative approach involving government, school jurisdictions and municipalities in taking steps to allow charter schools to own schools they currently occupy or to secure long-term leases of the buildings.

What are charter schools?

Charter schools are autonomous public schools with unique mandates and elected boards, and charter schools are public schools which, through unique programs, offer both innovation and choice to parents.

We are not private schools and are open to all students in keeping with our mandate.

Charter School Update

Students' Achievement on Provincial Assessment Tests

Charter schools have established themselves as educational institutions that provide improve student learning outcomes. Reports published by the Fraser Institute "School Report Cards" and C.D. Howe Institute "Identifying Alberta Best Schools" consistently rank charter schools as providing very high student learning outcomes.

Leadership Initiative

"Research findings have concluded that, next to the teacher, the school leader has the most impact on the student's school experience and ultimately his/her school success" **The Alberta School Leadership Framework: Promoting Growth, Development and Accountability, Alberta Education June 18, 2010**

In May 2011, The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS) began a journey of learning to develop a deeper understanding of school leadership and to grow in their ability to positively impact learner engagement. The guiding light is fostering system and school leadership practices that support students to be engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with entrepreneurial spirit. This is being accomplished through a three-year School Leadership Learning (SLL) initiative that through reflection, co-learning and inquiry, participants report a deeper understanding of leadership links to student success in keeping with the ideas of Inspiring Education. With the support of Alberta Education funding since the fall of 2012 TAAPCS has

continued this important work. An important aim of this initiative is that the emerging findings about leadership learning within the draft Professional Practice Competencies for School Leadership in Alberta (PPCSLA) will be of interest and benefit not only to public charter school leaders but will serve to inform engaged leadership learning throughout the province. Teaching and leadership are intricately woven together and the Task Force for Teaching Excellence made this point very succinctly when it stated,

“The quality of teaching is directly affected by the quality of leadership with which it occurs. After teaching, leadership has the second biggest effect on raising achievement.” The Task Force for Teaching Excellence, Alberta Education May 2014

Research with post secondary institutions

Charters schools are continuously involved in action research and innovation projects that provide changes in practice to strongly impact student learning.

As well due to the support of this government in areas of charter renewal terms and facilities, charter schools have been able to devote a larger portion of their time resources to collaboration or engagement with post-secondary institutions. The collaborations, partnerships and innovations that are taking place currently are extremely exciting. Many of the charter schools have been designated as Partner Research Schools or are in research partnerships with post secondary institutions such as; University of Alberta, University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge and Mount Royal University. One innovative research partnership can be seen by Foundations for the Future Charter Academy partnering with Gonzaga University in Spokane in the preparation of leaders through offering a Master’s Degree in School Leadership to cohorts of FFCA staff.

Another exciting research partnership that is currently being discussed is between Suzuki Charter School and the University of Alberta. This research partnership is exciting because it moves charter schools closer to the potential to provide improvements to the education system as a whole.

There is growing research that one of the biggest impediments to cognitive development and learning may be the fear by learners to publicly make a mistake. It appears that this fear may be reduced in the Suzuki classroom as teachers create learning environments whereby students feel safe in thinking in innovative ways, sharing those ideas within the classroom, and receiving feedback that allows students to move their learning to a higher level showing persistence, resourcefulness and confidence. These traits then lead to higher achievers and also set the stage for life-long learning. However more study is needed within the Suzuki classroom because this fear of making mistakes might be most paralyzing for high-level, highly aware learners.

“Albertans said the teacher should consider the interests, talents, passions and natural curiosities of the learner. The teacher should inspire and motivate, while planting the seeds for life-long learning” Alberta Education, Inspiring Education April 2010

If teachers can communicate to learners that taking risk in their thinking and innovation will require accepting that in the process it will include making mistakes and that this learning will occur in a safe and nurturing environment the teacher will foster an environment of thinking outside the box or in other words an “intellectual sandbox”. The teacher will have inspired and motivated, they will have planted the seeds of life-long learning. This is the essence of Inspiring Education.

The goal is that this type of research will lead to educational information and professional development for teachers on tackling the implicit fear that all learners have about making mistakes and lead to the creation of the emotional and social climates to nurture the most sophisticated method of cognitive development and learning in our 21st century learners.

What is our “ASK”?

As public schools we are striving to be recognized and treated in a fair and equitable manner. It has been a challenge but we have come along way. Two important areas in which we still seek support from government are facility acquisition and inclusive education funding.

As we stated earlier we are very thankful that the Minister promised help with our facility concerns and we see this occurring. What we need now is better access to more facilities. Along with the access to facilities we want to also be able to control our facilities, so that we can make decisions over repairs and renovations if we are in long term leases.

In the Inspiring Education report the Vision is supported by six Values. The third value is *“choice - learners have a choice of both programs and methods of learning”*. Charter schools continue to have many students wishing to attend their schools but unable to due to facility constraints. Charter schools keep waiting lists or must admit students based on a lottery system; regardless of the method there is a constant reminder that a segment of Albertans have voiced their preferred choice. Charter schools want to be able to meet this demand and the only way we can is to have access to more facilities in a timely manner so that we can accept all learners that have voiced their preferred choice.

We support the Inspiring Education initiatives wholeheartedly. Under Inspiring Education’s seven Guiding Principles we find the fourth listed as Inclusive, Equitable Access. *“Every learner should have fair and reasonable access to educational opportunities regardless of ability, economic circumstances, location, or cultural background.”*

We do have a grave concern regarding the funding for Inclusive Education when it comes to charter schools. The formula used while fair and equitable for some of our schools (those which

historically have served students who were coded - gifted or at risk or having serious needs) does not support the majority of our schools who do not currently receive the same funding as our larger public school counterparts. If government is to be true to the spirit of the Inspiring Education initiatives, which we believe it is, charter schools are asking for similar recognition when it comes to Inclusive Education Funding. Not more but similar. This would mean that charter schools would receive the same allocation as public schools which is \$513.44 per Full Time Equivalent enrolled instead of the current 10% or \$56.10. Charter schools are deeply committed to continuing to provide learners regardless of ability, economic circumstances, location or cultural background the very best educational opportunity possible.

To summarize charter schools ask for your “fair and equitable” support in the areas of facilities and Inclusive Education Funding allowing us to continue to provide the educational choice that your government had the vision to create for learners of the 21st century.

This brings us to the end of our presentation. We thank you once again for the invitation to present to Capital Caucus today. We would gladly answer any questions that you may have on the presentation or about charter schools in general.