

For Discussion Purposes

Charter School Concept Paper

Consideration of a vision for the future of charter schools.

The Government of Alberta established charter schools in a 1994 amendment to the *School Act* as part of a larger initiative to increase the education program choices available to Alberta parents. It was intended that charter schools would stimulate innovation and diversity in educational delivery.

Charter school operators (non-profit societies or companies) have five-year agreements, or charters, with the Minister of Education to offer students education programs that are innovative and promise to improve student achievement. Operators are exempt from the public school requirement to offer special education programs to students who need them. Operators agree to share information about their operations with the Alberta education community. The Minister has the opportunity to renew the charter if the Minister is satisfied that the operator has met the charter's terms. In some cases, local school boards have replicated some of the education programs offered by charter schools.

Alberta Education has completed a study of the impact of Alberta's charter schools. The major findings included:

- a) Charter schools have provided enhanced choice in the system, both by providing it directly to families and by being one of the stimuli that has led other jurisdictions to offer more alternative programming. However, the provision of choice appears largely to have been limited to larger centres.
- b) Overall, charter schools appear to have provided enhanced student learning outcomes as compared to other similar schools and as compared to similar students enrolled in other jurisdiction types.
- c) One of the original purposes of charter schools was that they would be centres of innovation and would share innovations with the rest of the system. This purpose has largely not been realized.
- d) Charter schools have developed momentum, growing quickly since their inception, and now comprise over 1% of the school population. Their waiting lists are such that more growth would take place were adequate facilities provided.
- e) There are concerns in the rest of the Alberta school system about charter schools and about where the movement is taking the system.
- f) Charter schools have become a well-established part of the public school system, and the consensus of those consulted during this study was that there is a need to develop a revised charter school governance model that addresses the legitimate concerns of both the charter schools and other stakeholders in the system.

The study concluded that it is time to reconsider the 1994 objectives for charter schools and to adjust these objectives so they are more attuned to today's education realities and intents. The ideas presented in this concept paper are informed by, but not limited to, those found in the study.

Currently, the Minister limits the growth of charter schools by requiring charter documents to specify maximum student enrolments and by limiting the supply of school facilities.

VISION:

One possibility for a different vision—a next generation for Alberta charter schools. Education program choice for students is important, but charter schools could also offer the opportunity to explore and develop the education programs we will need to support the transition to a robust, knowledge-centred economy based in Alberta. The next generation for Alberta's charter schools should serve as provincial innovative education research centres.

This vision for the next generation for Alberta charter schools would require engagement in significant education research. Alberta's new charter schools, with an emphasis on exploring innovation, would give researchers a unique opportunity to conduct a thorough research program in a relatively controlled setting. Enhanced collection of data for longitudinal study would be more likely, and dissemination of the research through peer-reviewed journals would be expected.

In this new vision, charter schools would strive to gather new ideas to improve student success. They would build on the traditional relationship basic education has had with post-secondary research institutions as a source of ideas and would establish guiding relationships with post-secondary educators who have traditionally had little direct involvement with basic education. University faculties of medicine, nursing, social work, engineering, fine arts, or sciences; Polytechnic departments of manufacturing and automation, hospitality and tourism; or college faculties of science and technology, international education and languages might inform different approaches to education and offer valuable insights.

Capitalizing on a relationship with post-secondary partners and researchers, charter schools would fine-tune initial ideas into education experiences that clearly advance student success. In turn, these relationships might help post-secondary institutions move to their own next generation of education practice. Parents, teachers and school administrators would choose these schools because they are interested in being part of provincially, nationally and globally-recognized programs of education improvement.

Alberta Education envisions charter schools as catalysts for critical thinking about education. Many people offer the Minister advice on how to improve education; the next generation of charter schools would act as pilots or incubators and could let the Minister test the best of these ideas. Each charter could define the scope of the ideas to be explored and the scope of the foundational requirements in basic education, such as alternate forms of the programs of study, different approaches to staffing, other ways to evaluate student success and alternative funding models.

Charter schools could also have an increased responsibility for spreading effective education practices. Publication of research about effective practices would go part of the way, but they could go further. In the new vision for charter schools, charter school teachers and administrators could play a more significant role in the professional development of others. They could serve as mentors to teachers and administrators in other schools. Charter schools could offer others the opportunity for extended visits of observation or practice, perhaps through videoconferencing. The next generation of charter schools would be an in-demand resource for Alberta's educators who want to improve their professional practice.

RESOURCES:

Within this vision, charter operators would continue to operate with administrative and operational funding at rates similar to other school authorities, but would also recognize the costs of these additional expectations. Research funding through the charter operator, to individual researchers or to a research consortium would determine, case by case, the amount of funding necessary to achieve the charter research aims. There are several options to support the increased responsibility for professional development, including direct funding to charter operators, the Association and/or professional development consortia.

GOVERNANCE:

A new vision for charter schools would also give new options for governance. There could be charter proposals from operators of existing charter schools or other non-profit societies and companies, but also proposals from public and separate school boards, operators of private schools, post-secondary institutions, other public institutions and business organizations. Governance could also come from regional authorities and/or a coalition of interested organizations.

Governors of the next generation of charter schools would have a clear mandate: with post-secondary research partners, develop a thorough understanding of factors that influence student success, build those factors into effective school practices and help to make those practices available to all Alberta students. The success of the next generation of Alberta's charter schools would be demonstrated by the effect these schools have on promoting student success across Alberta's education system.

In keeping with the goals of this mandate, the term of each charter need not be fixed at five years, but instead could be commensurate with the education challenge that the charter applicants propose. There could be options to renew a school's charter for a period if the school had:

- a) provided professional development opportunities related to its innovative approach to the rest of Alberta's education community,
- b) met or exceeded appropriate targets as set out in a student outcomes accountability framework,
- c) achieved student achievement results as good or better than provincial results as a whole, measured in a value-added manner,
- d) earned parental satisfaction results better than those of the province as a whole, and at least as good as results for schools within public and/or separate boards offering alternative programs and/or catering to the same defined populations, and
- e) shared with the education community their research, which evaluates the success of the innovation and identifies reasons for that success with government and educators.