



Alberta's Public Charter Schools
"Freedom to Create – Spirit to Achieve"
May 2009

*"The future is not a result of choices
among alternative paths offered by the present,
but a place that is created;
created first in mind, then in will and next in activity.
The future is not someplace we are going to, but one we are creating.
The paths to it are not found but made
and the activity of making them
changes both the maker and the destination."*

*John Scharr, Professor, University of California at Santa Cruz
from "Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans"*

The stated vision of Alberta Education is *"Education inspires and enables students to achieve success and fulfillment as citizens in a changing world"*. In order to reach this preferred future, Alberta Education has welcomed and sponsored opportunities for continuous learning, improvement and innovation in educational practice. One of the best examples of this forward thinking was the establishment of charter public schools some 14 years ago, despite the fact that no other province in Canada had (or has since) implemented such legislation. There are now 13 charter public schools in the province, some of which have been in existence for over a decade.

Charter schools "represent one strategy in support of the Alberta Government's commitment to providing choice in the education system." As well, charter schools were intended to "provide a basic education in a different and enhanced way to improve student learning." In December 2006, Alberta Education completed a draft report of the "Charter School Impact Study". This study concluded with the statement:

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 legislative model for charter schools that addresses the legitimate concerns of both the charter schools and other stakeholders during the study. The general consensus among those who were consulted during the study is that charter schools appear to be “here to stay”; that is, they will continue to be a part of the Alberta public education system for the foreseeable future.

Charter schools have proven their success across many measures, demonstrating excellent and innovative educational programming, outstanding student achievement, and strong popularity with the public. As Education Minister Ron Liepert stated in October 2007 *“The experiment is overcharter schools are here to stay.”*

Although initially schools of choice, charter schools have evolved into more than educational alternatives; currently they provide distinctive and innovative experiences under highly accountable, flexible and responsive governance systems. Important questions to be considered regarding the future decades of charter school success include: How will charter schools continue to evolve in the service of families, choice, innovation and most importantly enhanced student learning? What is their role in educational research and systemic improvement? In what ways will these learning communities offer leadership to critique, challenge, question and share practice as they participate in their own transformation in learning and teaching? How might they improve conditions for their learners and all learners? What relationships and networks will be required to achieve such vision?

TAAPCS offers the following as a statement of preferred future for Alberta’s public charter schools:

Alberta’s public charter schools, utilizing nimble governance and learning-focused leadership, invite meaningful public participation in support of high levels of student success. They are innovative, rigorously collaborative, research-focused and operationally permanent schools of choice. Charter schools are highly successful communities of practice, oriented towards ongoing improvement through the nurturing of professional relationships.

To enable ongoing success, the need exists to address three significant challenges. These include implementing an enhanced research and innovation agenda; continuing to promote a culture of responsible and flexible governance; and, achieving permanent charter status.

Research and Innovation

Charter schools will continue to undertake, as well as to expand and extend their innovation and research agendas through systematic investigations of the commitments held within each of their charters. They intend to “drill down” and to learn more about effective teaching and learning within the context of their distinctive approaches to education. Involving partners and sharing the outcomes of their research agendas has the potential to effect systemic change within the broader community and to add value to the education system. Partners to be engaged in this research might include, for example, community, Government departments, Post Secondary institutions, charter school colleagues, public

and private schools as well as the broader community. Innovation is understood to mean “incremental improvement” as charter schools respond to the results of their research.

“Why should charter schools be designated as prototypes of centres of research and innovation?” Quite simply, charter schools know how to innovate and have demonstrated an ongoing ability to sustain innovation over time – no small feat in the educational world. The legislation that created charter schools provided these educators with the gift of “separation” from the regular structures of large public school boards to meet the needs of particular groups of children. In this innovative work, charter schools will assist in defining new schooling models, thus benefitting Alberta’s already excellent education system.

Responsible and Flexible Governance

Believing that “education is everyone’s business” charter school Directors will work vigorously and passionately to offer advocacy and leadership on behalf of their students. Collaboration and trust will be bellwethers in these open and proactive cultures – cultures which value comprehensive and participatory ways of thinking, learning, and living. Directors will advocate for resources and support to meet the distinctive features and needs of each of their individual schools, while at the same time, come together with colleagues in the service of common interests.

Charter schools will provide for the direct and meaningful involvement of parents and community members through a responsible and flexible governance model. Through collaborative, respectful and supportive relationships, parents, community members, educators and students will assume responsibility and accountability for their educational results. Specifically, guided by the experience, expertise and talent of committed educators, parents and community members will accept responsibility. Accountability will exist not only to the Minister of Education, but to the parents, teachers, administrators, students and community members within each charter school’s educational community. Moreover, the considerable autonomy granted to charter schools promotes pro-active, responsive and flexible governance. Within the context of an involved school community, individual student achievement will become the focus of accountability, rather than simple jurisdictional averages of achievement. When education is “everyone’s business”, we accept a larger hope of attaining the real goal of education whereby every child learns and every child succeeds.

Permanence

Permanence ensures the stability and future of charter schools. This is especially so in respect of attracting and retaining qualified staff, obtaining appropriate facilities for the long term, reassuring parents, students and staff of the longevity of the school, facilitating sustainable research agendas, and addressing more acceptable workloads.

It is the view of TAAPCS that, once any public charter school has demonstrated success, it will be granted permanent charter status. In other words, when a public charter demonstrates 5 years of educationally and fiscally responsible education, it would no longer be required to undergo regular external evaluations and make application for charter renewal. Further, once a public charter school has

been granted permanent status, it will be accorded all considerations and obligations provided to other public school authorities in Alberta.

Within the concept of permanence, charter schools will be eligible for:

- Timely access to student-ready (and program-appropriate) facilities
- Access to Municipal Reserve Lands
- Access to capital funding from Alberta Education to build/renovate school facilities
- Access to IMR funding to maintain major components of school facilities
- Removal of enrolment caps
- Consideration of Associate Membership status within ASBA/PSBAA

It is important to note that TAAPCS expects permanent charter schools to be held to a very high standard of accountability. Additionally, these schools will welcome opportunities to demonstrate their capacity as models of ongoing innovation, research, and student achievement.

As perceived by TAAPCS, the greatest need in a revised legislative model for charter schools would be to establish their permanence. Such a step would recognize the clearly established success of charter schools in enhancing individual student achievement and solidifying the government's commitment to parental choice as a cornerstone of educational policy.

To continue to foster innovation in charter school governance, a relationship between individual charter schools and Alberta Education is envisioned relative to the selection and appointment of directors. This new way of working will provide another image of successful and responsible governance and accountability.

The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS) has an integral role to play in coordination and leadership, as charter schools move forward to both build and meet their futures. A unique and forward-looking group, TAAPCS has demonstrated that charter schools are able to come together across their differences to focus on shared goals and opportunities. From its inception, the organization's values, guiding principles, and operations have provided an image of responsible and pro-active governance: a positive, creative space where elected officials, superintendents, principals, Alberta Education (and other government department personnel) have come together to problem-solve on behalf of charter schools and their students. TAAPCS is like its member schools: it is an organization which promotes responsible governance through the development and implementation of a culture which values and lives relationships, partnerships, inclusivity, participation and community.

Conclusion

Charter schools are very successful public schools which add value to Alberta's already excellent education system through achieving outstanding student results and demonstrating the ability to sustain and share educational innovation. These schools offer distinctive programming and provide relevant parental and community participation. The future for charter schools clearly lies within their cultures of responsible and flexible governance, along the path toward permanence, as prototypical

sites of educational research and innovation. Charter schools will continue meet the needs of specific groups of children through demonstrating that these students' learning outcomes are valid and (in many cases) better than they would be in traditional school systems. As centres of research and innovation, charter schools will prove their worth and be understood to be rigorously accountable, yet in different ways.

TAAPCS recognizes and appreciates the important role that will be played by Alberta Education in the determination of the actual future for charter schools in our province. It is our strong desire that our Association be invited to participate in a dialogue with Alberta Education on this topic and that the ideas contained within this document be considered as a starting place for the conversation.