



## **TAAPCS' Response to Alberta Education's Charter School Concept Paper**

### **Preamble**

The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools appreciates the opportunity to respond to Alberta Education's Charter School Concept Paper. At its October 22, 2009 regular meeting, there was considerable discussion and debate. While this dialogue has been summarized below in four points, several observations of the change process are provided to help establish the context for those points.

It is recognized and understood that a characteristic of life in general is that change is inevitable. TAAPCS therefore appreciates Alberta Education's efforts to engage its partners in dialogue about future needs. There is concern, however, that the positive features of charter schools and the Regulations governing them could be lost simply in the name of change.

Author Michael Fullan has repeatedly stated that "change is a process, not an event"; charter schools fear that at the conclusion of the *Inspiring Education* dialogue, there will be limited opportunity to meet with Alberta Education officials, in particular Minister Hancock, to clarify the context of our situation before a major change event takes place.

The work of people such as psychologist Dr. Kurt Lewin indicates three phases in the change process – unfreezing, transition and re-freezing. Charter schools fear that in order to prompt large scale change (unfreeze), a crisis will be precipitated (which Lewin calls "burning the bridge") and our members will be left in confusion and distress. If this occurs, the transition to a new culture (re-freezing) will be infinitely more difficult, and therefore of less benefit to the children we serve.

Authors Michael Fullan and Patrick Dixon speak of "moral purpose" as being foundational to effective change. If moral purpose is not understood or accepted by the recipients of the change, it is less likely to be supported by the masses. As Dixon says, "you will only bring change into your organization when people connect with your strategy. Because when people connect, they believe in your vision and when they believe it is going to make their world and others' world a better place, they'll work with you to transform the organization". Recent reports of October's *Inspiring Education Conference* have been very positive because it appears that the speakers made valid points about the need for change so students can be better prepared for the future. Charter schools therefore appreciate Alberta Education's initiative to make its moral purpose known, and encourage the Ministry to continue emphasizing future student needs as an impetus for change.

**Concerns/Questions:** (Paraphrased/quoted and explained)

1. “Our schools are already doing good work. Public school systems have emulated us. Is there a feeling now that we haven’t been successful and we now have to make drastic changes? Why are we being asked to justify our existence?”

[Change is difficult, especially when current practices are seen as successful. More work needs to be done re: “moral purpose”.]

2. “Although the idea of Charter schools becoming ‘centres of innovation’ is understandable, is this really our job? We worry about teacher and administrator burnout. What resources will be available to do this? What role will the government play?”

[Charter schools are clearly not averse to being intimately involved in the research and innovation process, but they wish to have more information as to what ‘centres of innovation’ would look like, how they would function, and what supports would be in place. Involving us, along with post-secondary and “other” partners, throughout the entire planning process would be critically important.]

3. “We are uncertain what a new governance model would look like. One of the tenets of our existing system is that we have flexibility. Any change is worrisome”.

[As noted in our “Preferred Future” paper, we see our schools as “utilizing nimble governance and learning-focused leadership”. If a new governance model were instituted which, for instance, was patterned after Health’s ‘Super Board’, we feel we’d be losing the nimbleness and flexibility we currently have and which works extremely well. As well, we believe that the uniqueness of each charter could potentially be compromised through the implementation of a ‘Super Board’.]

4. “Is mention of a new governance model an indication of broken trust between charter schools and Alberta Education? Are people saying that we need to be more closely monitored and more accountable than we currently are? Why?”

[If there is a trust issue, we feel it is more advantageous for both parties to deal directly with specific issues than to institute a new model which, if anything, could result in even more distrust. Furthermore, to paraphrase Stephen M.R. Covey - when you have low trust, it results in higher costs and slower speed. Conversely, when you have high trust, it results in lower costs and higher speed. If we are concerned with Charter schools becoming increasingly more innovative, it seems to be counter-productive to add more impediments to the process of governance. In the interest of maintaining/enhancing trust, charter schools feel that Alberta Education needs to clarify why a new governance model would be needed and what its ‘moral purpose’ might be].

**Conclusion:**

While other items were discussed/debated during the October 22 meeting, we trust the aforementioned comments and observations capture the essence of our dialogue, and we respectfully submit this response for the Minister’s consideration.

October 23, 2009