



## **TAAPCS' Response to Questions of the Minister of Education**

As requested by Minister Hancock, The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools is providing a response to recently posed questions. These responses are the result of dialogue at the Association's meeting on October 22, 2009.

### **1. What is the role and purpose of charter schools?**

In TAAPCS' recently completed "preferred future" paper entitled "Alberta's Public Charter Schools, Freedom to Create-Spirit to Achieve", the following vision was articulated:

"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 on-going improvement through the nurturing of professional relationships".

In part, the vision speaks to the role and purpose of charter schools: to provide choice and enhanced learning through on-going innovation that relies heavily upon research and collaboration with partners. In the future, with a more coordinated, concentrated effort as well as with assistance from its partners, it is reasonable to assume that these schools can effectively serve as innovative education research centres, thus benefiting other students in Alberta and beyond.

### **2. How does one measure innovation?**

The research on innovation is quite clear in its observation that before measurement can occur, it is first necessary to define it. Although it has a business orientation, we see merit in the Oslo Manual (OECD) definition which says innovation is "the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (goods or services) or process, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization or external affairs". With a definition such as this as a starting point, it becomes possible to begin to identify, for example, those "products" (such as new curricula) or "processes" (such as new technology to improve online learning) or "external affairs" (such as new approaches to communicating with parents and students) and thus begin to "measure" the impact of innovation. It is also clear from research that efforts to effectively measure innovation in education are in a very early stage and much more needs to be done. In this regard, TAAPCS as an organization is prepared to take a leadership role.

### 3. How could charter schools partner with public institutions to share their innovations?

Membership in the ASBA and/or PSBAA would assist charter schools in having a larger audience with whom to speak of innovation. As well, through research partnerships with post-secondary institutions, there is a stronger possibility of innovative practices being more widely accepted by others than if charter schools were solely responsible for disseminating this information.

### 4. How do charter schools become more public in governance?

Charter schools select their officials according to their by-laws. In the future, schools could send their directors' names to the government to be "appointed" by the Minister.

### 5. What is an appropriate accountability framework?

When charter schools began in 1994, there was much less accountability for Alberta schools than there is currently, and therefore it was logical to expect Alberta Education to closely examine whether or not charter schools were meeting their mandate. In the last decade, however, Alberta has been very progressive in its accountability approach to all schools. Charter schools feel that the extra layer of accountability that applies only to them is onerous (especially to smaller schools with fewer resources), and that the province-wide approach that is currently used is sufficient (particularly in light of the fact that the research on measuring innovation - a likely pillar item - is not very advanced.)

### 6. How would charter schools serve all students in an inclusive education system?

Students are served within the context of each school's charter and within the parameters of parental needs. Charter schools support open admission, however "caps" are an issue, as is the availability of space to serve students.

### 7. How will charter schools add value to the education system?

It has been noted that since 1995, charter schools have served as role models for public school divisions. Noticeable emulation has occurred in urban centres. For instance, where once there were no "specialized" schools in some public school divisions, there are now several. In the future, as "centres of innovation", there would be more to emulate – both in Alberta and beyond.

### 8. What are the strategies to deal with enrolment caps and facilities?

In the TAAPCS document entitled "Legislative Proposal to the Minister" (September, 2008), several requests were outlined which relate to facilities and, by extension, to enrolment caps. These issues are "permanent charter status", "access to surplus school reserve land", "access to funding to build schools" and "timely access to closed school buildings". Our belief is that, if charter schools had permanent status, we would be able to enter into longer term capital projects and be eligible for capital funding. Further, our facilities situation would be improved if we had access to surplus school reserve land, and if we were able to obtain closed school buildings in a timely manner. If these requests were granted, we believe it would alleviate the enrolment cap problem and therefore help to satisfy the growing demand by parents for access to charter school education.

## 9. What are the barriers to success?

In general, it appears the public does not understand the nature of charter schools and therefore support from certain sectors is, at best, limited. Further, some public school divisions see charter schools as “stealing their students”. These school divisions, as members of the ASBA and PSBAA, are therefore not overly supportive of charter school directors/administrators being part of their organizations. Subsequently, limited dialogue and collaboration can occur. This has a negative impact on the sharing of information about innovative practices, and the building of partnerships. Another barrier to success is the lack of continuity in the appointment of Ministers of Education. While each Minister might be supportive of charter schools, it appears that he/she does not carry that portfolio sufficiently long to be able to fully address the issues faced, and TAAPCS feels it is repeatedly “starting over”.

In closing, TAAPCS is pleased with the support it has received from Alberta Education over the years and trusts that the aforementioned observations are interpreted in the constructive manner in which they are intended. We appreciate that Minister Hancock has asked for our written response, and we sincerely hope that there is an opportunity in the near future to meet with him personally to provide further contextual clarification to his questions.

Respectfully submitted,

October 23, 2009.