

Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

December 2009

TAAPCS Regular Meeting....

October 22, 2009

Deputy Minister's Presentation

The regular meeting of The Alberta Association of Public Charter Schools was held on October 22 in Calgary. A highlight of this meeting was Deputy Minister Keray Henke's presentation to the delegates. After briefly referring to budget issues and upcoming changes to the *School Act* as a response to the "Inspiring Education" dialogue, Mr. Henke congratulated charter schools for the excellent job they do and for the positive contributions they have made to Alberta's educational community. However he also gently challenged schools to adapt and evolve to meet the demands of the 21st century learner. He indicated that, by their very nature, charter schools are well positioned to be innovative and creative in their approaches, but stressed that we need to consider ways of sharing our research and innovations with others so that a greater number of students can benefit.

Mr. Henke questioned, "How do we take what we know about the international scene and apply it to our own situation in Alberta? We know that our local context is different, but are there things we can use in Alberta?"

Mr. Henke indicated that "in Alberta we need a

more comprehensive and coordinated research strategy" and he suggested that charter schools could possibly become "centres of innovation", working closely with universities, colleges and other partners to research educational initiatives from North America and abroad.



L-R Judy Gray, DM Keray Henke, Jay Pritchard

The Deputy Minister also acknowledged the role of Alberta Education in the process of assisting charter schools with their innovative and creative endeavours. He asked, "Are there things Alberta Education does which inhibit your creativity?", and "What should Alberta Education do to bring partners together to engage in the dialogue needed to move research and innovation strategies forward?"

At the close of his presentation, Mr. Henke replied to questions from participants. His frankness and candor were gratefully acknowledged by the delegates.



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Other highlights

Garry Andrews was introduced as the new Executive Director.

Responses were received to the Minister's request for feedback regarding the Charter School Concept Paper.

Consideration will be given to providing professional development opportunities for Directors in 2010.

Committee appointments were made.



L-R Keray Henke, Judy Gray, Jay Pritchard, Garry Andrews

2009 Annual General Meeting

Jay Pritchard and Judy Gray were nominated and acclaimed as Co-Chairs. Steve Simmons was nominated and acclaimed to the position of Vice-Chair.

The By-laws will be revised to reflect changes within the organization.

Charter School Conference 2009....

Approximately 400 people attended Conference 2009 held at Calgary's Greenwood Inn on October 22/23. Thursday's speaker was the inspirational Mr. Alvin Law, who despite being born without arms, has shown the capacity to succeed in facing the challenges he encounters daily. Speaking on Friday was the Honorable Dave Hancock, Minister of Education. Mr. Hancock commented not only on the challenges of province's financial situation, but also on the initiatives being undertaken by Alberta Education and their impact on the future of our students.

The conference program was jointly planned by representatives from Westmount Charter School and the Calgary Regional Consortium. Despite some concerns about the size of the venue, participants were positive in their comments regarding the program. Appreciation is extended to the planning committee and those people who helped in various capacities throughout the event.



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Hon. Dave Hancock, Minister of Education

The next conference is slated for 2011. A survey is currently being conducted to determine what factors need to be considered for planning the 2011 event.

Teachers honoured....

Canada's National History Society has selected two charter school teachers from Alberta as recipients of the 2009 Governor General's Awards for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History. On Friday, November 20, 2009, Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, Governor General of Canada, presented the Awards to Mr. Neil Robinson, Westmount Charter School and Mr. Neil Stephenson, Calgary Science School. Along with the Robinson and Stephenson

families, Mr. Merv Kurtz, Westmount Superintendent, Mrs. Martha Faulkner, Westmount Principal, Mr. Gordon Welch, Calgary Science School Superintendent, and Mr. Darrell Lonsberry, Calgary Science School Principal, were in attendance.

The official press release says this about Mr. Robinson's work: "With the roll of a die, Grade 7 students at Calgary's Westmount Charter School are travelling back in time to the 15th century where they're navigating treacherous seas and discovering the dawn of European exploration. This is an innovative lesson in "new school" going "old school".

History teacher Neil Robinson has transformed the popular board games Settlers of Catan and Risk to create his very own board game that transports his students from the beginnings of European exploration to the battle at the Plains of Abraham. From September to May, about 25 students in Mr. Robinson's class will gather for half an hour every day to explore the new world, trade with First Nations, hunt for riches, draft trade deals and establish land treaties. With a wall-sized board and hundreds of iconic hexagons that depict the geography of the west hemisphere, Robinson's students are challenged to think critically about Canadian history while passionately experiencing history for themselves."



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Westmount GG Award recipient Neil Robinson with Her Excellency Michaëlle Jean

At the Calgary Science School, Mr. Stephenson’s classroom is described as a place where “grade 7 students live the disciplines of history and graphic design, using 21st century tools to reinterpret events from Canada’s past.” Neil’s classroom combined exemplary historical inquiry skills with a unique lesson plan. Inspired by an online exhibit at the National Museum of Civilization, “Canada in a Box”, Neil developed an imaginative project where students collaboratively researched different Canadian historical events. Students learned how to assess historical documents, evaluating the reliability of authorship and identifying how to document sources. Over the course of one year, they collected and documented historical images and

artifacts. Using graphic design principles, students then remixed and digitally assembled new cigar box panels to represent historical time or events. The unit culminated in the creation of five historical Cigar Box panels and three short documentaries. Through the project, Canadian history opened up to become a creative and living discipline for the students involved.



CSS Principal Darrell Lonsberry, GG Award recipient Neil Stephenson, Superintendent Gordon Welch

It is noteworthy that three of the seven national award winners hail from the province of Alberta, with two of those representing charter schools.

Congratulations, Neil and Neil!



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New Facility for Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (MECCS)....

The start of 2009-2010 school year saw students at MECCS move into their new facility. Located approximately 45 minutes south west of Edmonton, the former St. John's School of Alberta was obtained by Mother Earth's in the spring of 2009 and now nicely accommodates all of their students.

Steve Simmons, a former staff member at St. John's in the 1980's and 1990's, says the school building has an interesting past. Originally built in 1967 by Ted Byfield, founder of the Alberta Report, it was patterned after the St. John's Cathedral School in Winnipeg.



Run by a Lay Anglican group called the Company of the Cross, St. John's reached its apex in the early 1990's when it had approximately 125 students, all living in the school's dorms. By 2007 however, the enrolment had declined to

approximately 50 students and a decision was made to cease operations, at least temporarily. The following year, reluctantly, St. John's Board of Directors decided to close down permanently and dispose of the property.

The Board of Directors for Mother Earth's was able to respond and within a relatively short time frame was able to acquire access to approximately 75% of the building. The move has been positive, according to Superintendent Ed Wittchen, who emphasized that it greatly enhances the opportunities for the students.

He appreciates the support of the MECCS Directors, administration, staff, and parents as well as Alberta Education in making this move a reality.

Research activities....

Several interesting and innovative research activities are taking place throughout Alberta's charter schools. For this newsletter, two activities are being featured.

Suzuki Charter School

When Karen Spencer, Assistant Principal, Suzuki Charter School, began studying for her Master's degree, she wanted to learn more about the impact homework has on student learning. What emerged, however, has been something broader.



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Discovering that her focus would need to be based upon a larger question than homework, Ms. Spencer used “Grounded Theory Design”, conducted online surveys, and developed two case studies involving parents, teachers and students.

Beginning with the general question, “What are the perceptions of students, parents and teachers regarding school, family and community partnerships that support student learning at home?”, Karen formulated two additional, more specific questions. “What constitutes learning at home?”, and “What are the characteristics of school, family and community partnerships that support student learning at home?” Several interesting themes have emerged and although the perceptions of each group may vary slightly (for instance regarding “role”), there is unanimous support for the understanding that “student growth is the desirable outcome”. The implications coming from this ambitious assignment are clear. Homework constitutes just one aspect of learning at home. What are the others, and what is the role of each participant in this partnership process? When her work has been vetted by her Graduate School advisors, she will be ready to share the results with her colleagues. While her research has involved Suzuki students, parents and teachers, Karen’s preliminary findings will no doubt have applicability to other schools as well.

Westmount Charter School

Several staff members at Westmount Charter School have now had abstracts of their research appear on the National/International stage.

Every two years, an international gathering of the Gifted Education community is held wherein educators from around the world come together to learn from each other. After being encouraged to engage in activities which would demonstrate that the school was achieving its vision of “being recognized as the centre for excellence in gifted education”, Westmount’s staff decided to submit written abstracts to the 2009 conference’s organizers. Seven abstracts were submitted by the following staff members:

- Mary Campbell, Michelle Bence (Early Literacy)
- Seamus Doyle, Kristy Martens (Integration of Philosophy 30 and Physics 30)
- Chris Hooper (Gifted Learners and Physical Inactivity)
- Neil Robinson (Impact of Global Issues on Gifted Teens)
- Chris Byron (Integrating Outdoor Education with Core Curriculum)
- Sandy Miller (Goal setting in High School Mathematics)
- Martha Faulkner (Improving Academic Performance of Gifted Underachievers)

After the conference organizers’ selection of the abstract “Improving Academic Performance of Gifted Underachievers”, Principal Martha Faulkner made a well received presentation at the conference in Vancouver in August, 2009.

****Editor’s note. If your school has projects you wish to have featured, please submit them to TAAPCS.***



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Farewell to Gordon Welch....

Mr. Gordon Welch, Superintendent at the Calgary Science School, will be leaving us in January 2010 as he enters a second retirement. Gordon has been a mainstay in Alberta's educational community for many years. His work as a teacher, administrator, superintendent and consultant has earned him high praise throughout his career. His positive disposition, wise counsel and breadth of understanding will be missed, as will his friendship. All the best to you, Gordon.

The appointment of Gordon's replacement has been approved, and we welcome Dr. Garry McKinnon who will be taking over at the Science School.

Welcome Bev Hammond....



Bev Hammond is the new Superintendent for Almadina Charter School. Bev comes to Almadina with extensive teaching and administrative experience throughout Canada, and we wish her well in her new assignment.



Best wishes....

The Executive of The Alberta Association of Public Charter Schools wishes the members of our educational community all the best for the holiday season. Have a safe, peaceful and joyful break.

