

Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

## June 2011 Issue

As in the past, we are pleased to have received newsletter submissions from our schools. The accomplishments and high quality of education being provided in our charter schools is again exemplified through the articles from the Westmount, Calgary Science and Calgary Girls' Schools. Before featuring the schools' stories however, we are providing a summary of the main events/initiatives the association has recently been involved with or impacted by.

– Dr. Garry Andrews, TAAPCS Executive Director

### New Education Act

The New Education Act has been tabled in the legislature and on May 2 and 3, representatives from the stakeholder groups in the province had the opportunity to review the document in sessions led by Education Minister Dave Hancock and Deputy Minister Keray Henke. While this document still needs to proceed through second and third readings, there is a sense of confidence that it will do so in spite of the government's current leadership competition and the political uncertainty surrounding such a situation. A summary of the main changes to the Act can be found on the Alberta Education website. Perhaps most relevant to charter schools is the Act's intent to provide a process to determine "permanence". Regulations for the Act will still need to be developed, therefore proclamation will not likely be completed until 2013; in the meantime we will still operate under the existing School Act.

### TAAPCS May meeting

The spring meeting of the association took place in Edmonton on May 6. The agenda was heavily influenced by such Alberta Education initiatives as the new *Education Act*, *Action on Inclusion*, upcoming changes to the leasing framework, and the Minister's Dialogue on Charter schools in Alberta's future.



Deputy Minister Keray Henke, May 6, 2011

In regard to the Minister's Dialogue, representatives from provincial stakeholder groups have been invited to attend an inclusive day of "dialogue" in Edmonton on June 2 for the purpose of achieving several outcomes. Agenda items will include: the search for consensus on the role and purpose of charter schools in Alberta, a discussion of how charter schools can or should use research-informed and innovative



Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

approaches to improve (*teacher practice and*) student learning, and the identification of the key elements of a charter school mandate to lead/support the transformation of education through research-informed innovation. The results of this dialogue are expected to impact the direction of the new Act's Regulations.

### Conference 2011

The 2011 Charter School Conference will be held in Calgary on October 20/21 with the theme of "Innovation". The conference begins with a keynote speech by Roger Garriock, Director of Canadian Operations for Destination ImagiNation, Inc., on Thursday evening, October 20, at the Coast Plaza Hotel in Calgary.

As well as Mr. Garriock, Deputy Minister Keray Henke will address the delegates on the importance of innovation as a factor in transforming education in



Roger Garriock

Alberta. On Friday, October 21, the sessions will shift to various charter school sites in Calgary. These half-day breakout sessions will feature presentations and discussions led by charter school personnel on "successful best practices which are research-informed and innovative". We have received suggestions for the topics to be presented and are currently developing a draft of the program and the locations for each session. At this time we have indications that approximately 500 people will be attending. In addition, 30 people have indicated an interest in the administrators' pre-conference (October

20) on innovative and creative problem-solving techniques. This pre-conference session will be led by Roger Garriock, our keynote speaker. Registration fees for both the conference and pre-conference will be determined by the end of June.

### Director Professional Development

Over the course of the past two years, professional development opportunities have been provided to directors in the form of workshops on leadership and government relations. In the next month, a survey will be circulated to determine if there is interest in professional development workshops focussing on such specific topics as: new Board member orientation, Board Self-Evaluation processes, and Superintendent Performance Evaluation, as well as on more general topics. It has also been suggested that continuous professional development opportunities might be made available online in a manner currently being offered by the ASBA and SSBA.

### Congratulations are in Order!

Recently two of our administrators received recognition through the publishing of articles in the CASS Connections Magazine.

Shelley Robinson of the **Calgary Science School** and John Picard of **Foundations for the Future Charter Academy** had articles they had written on the theme of "Student Engagement" published. Congratulations to Shelley and John.



Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

Another example of exemplary leadership being shown by charter school staff members is the recent award bestowed upon the **FFCA** administrative team. Through the efforts of its Secretary-Treasurer, Reta Morgan, **FFCA** has won the Meritorious Budget Award for the third year in a row. This prestigious award is bestowed by The Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO), which since 1910 has provided programs and services to promote the highest standards of school business management practices, professional growth, and the effective use of educational resources. In winning this award, **FFCA** met or exceeded a set of stringent criteria in its 2010-2011 budget submission. Only two Canadian School Districts have ever received this award in the seven years since its inception, the other being Lethbridge Public. Congratulations to Reta and the administrative team at **FFCA**.

Shelley Robinson will assume that role at **Westmount** (see below), while the competitions for the other positions are currently underway. Welcome Karen and Shelley!



Retiring Westmount Principal Martha Faulkner with student Lucas Hrubizna

## Retirement News

Several of our charter school administrators recently announced their retirements. They include Ches Cowley, Superintendent at **Calgary Girls' School**; Caroline Parker at **Calgary Girls' School**, Ms. Martha Faulkner, **Westmount Charter School**, and Sharon Goulet, **Suzuki Charter School**. Also, Steve Simmons, Superintendent at **Aurora Charter School**, although not retiring, is moving on to an administrative position with Edmonton Catholic. We thank these individuals for their contributions to charter schools over the years and wish them all the best as they move on to new stages in their lives. At the time of this writing, we understand that Ms. Karen Spencer will assume the role of principal at **Suzuki** and Dr.

## FEATURE ARTICLES

### Westmount Charter School

**Westmount Charter School,  
Calgary: The Four Pillars of  
Gifted Education**



Celebrating its fifteenth year, Westmount Charter School is a K-12 program in Calgary for Gifted students. Westmount's understanding is that giftedness does not come in one shape or size! Each gifted learner has his or her own unique strengths and challenges, and brings a truly passionate intensity toward areas of deep interest. With this in mind, Westmount Charter School takes a very broad



Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

approach to the needs of the gifted learner, an approach which has led to the identification of four foundational “pillars” for addressing the needs of its gifted learners: **the affective curriculum, health and wellness, social responsibility, and academics.** Here are some 2010-2011 highlights relating to each of these four pillars:

- On October 22-23, 2010, Westmount hosted its first *Pillars of Gifted Education* conference. The topic for this conference was “**The Affective Curriculum**”, with workshop presenters from around the province (and beyond!), and keynote speakers Dr. Tracy Cross from the College of William and Mary, and Dr. Richard Olenchak from the University of Houston. All Charter Schools seek ways to share their innovations with the broader educational community, and this Conference was a great venue for bringing together educators and parents from all segments of publicly-funded education (charter, public and separate), University professors, as well as professionals from the business community.
- Students have taken a very active role in encouraging **Health and Wellness** at Westmount. The “HASC Force” (a Healthy, Active School Committee comprised of grade 5 students) offered students a 40 minute interactive lesson during the month of April to promote the new *Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth*. With fun, interactive sessions for grade 1-3 students that covered the healthy eating guidelines, program

vocabulary and portion sizes, the HASC Force did a great job of bringing the principles of healthy eating to the youngest students in a fun and memorable way.



Students from Westmount’s “HASC Force”

- The importance of **Social Responsibility** is enthusiastically embraced by Westmount’s students. Up to 60 elementary students attend the weekly *HipKids* club, which engages in a different community-based project each month. For example, in February 2011, *HipKids* and their families donated nature books, binoculars, magnifying glasses, bug collectors, journals and crafts for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary, with students decorating shoe boxes to contain nature kits for children’s camp out experiences. At the High School level, *The Human Condition* locally-developed courses are exceptionally popular. In April 2011, twenty-one grade 11 and 12 students and four



Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

teachers put their learnings to work on an international humanitarian trip to Peru. The intention of this trip was for students to see and take part in social projects in developing nations in order to get a better sense of the world around them. Highlights of the trip were construction work and interaction with students at a school in Urubamba, as well as breath-taking bus adventures through the Andes reaching altitudes of 14,000 feet!

- Finally, Westmount's **academic** success is well-documented via PAT and Diploma results. In order to reach beyond test results as a measure of this success, the school conducts an "alumni survey" each spring, which surveys the previous year's grade 12 graduates to receive their impressions of their first year after Westmount. Each year, the school has been honoured to receive very positive feedback from its grads. This past year, 97% of Westmount's 2010 graduates who are in Universities and Colleges endorsed the "overall academic preparation" they had received at Westmount – which gives a five-year average of 92% on this overall measure. Grads in the workplace also give a strong "thumbs-up" to Westmount, with 100% of the class of 2010 favouring their overall readiness for the workplace, which gives a 2006-2010 average of 88%.

In all, Westmount Charter School has had a busy fifteenth year! In addition to the daily "busy-ness" of addressing student needs, Westmount is preparing for

two major transitions. First, Martha Faulkner is retiring at the end of June after six exceptional years as Principal. Second, after being a single-campus entity since it opened in 1996, Westmount will be moving to two "near-northwest" campuses in September 2011: Parkdale campus, for Kindergarten to grade 4, and Sir William Van Horne campus for grades 5-12. It will be exciting to move to these new homes, and to meet our new Principal, Dr. Shelley Robinson!

## Calgary Science School

### Working with Student Exemplars: Staff Reflections at the Calgary Science School

Shelley Robinson, PhD



One of the goals in our AISI Cycle 4 work at the Calgary Science School is that "teachers will find and develop student exemplars that demonstrate the expectations of the program while considering and then clarifying the standards and scope and sequence of the graded programs" (CSS AISI Report, 2010 at <http://www.calgaryscienceschool.com/publications/default.asp>). However after two professional development day sessions we learned that by actually participating in the matter of exemplars, things were not quite as straightforward as we had expected. A series of questions emerged as we entered each phase of our professional development work together. What we first noticed in both professional development days with student exemplars as our full staff focus was that we had some difficulty finding exemplars from our teachers representing "poor",



Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

“satisfactory” and “very good” work. Teachers have a tendency to save the “very good” examples of their student work, and lose the other examples along the way. In fact, teachers often save only their very “outstanding” examples of students’ work. What we are learning is that students often respond positively to being able to see the varying standards of product and performance (insufficient, poor, limited, satisfactory, proficient and excellent). They often identify with a specific exemplar standard and can then strive to achieve or exceed it. By only providing examples of excellence, there is not always a way for students to see the discreet ladder of success that they must climb to get to the target of defining their work as exceptional at their grade level.

We also found that sometimes the student exemplars that we did save were far above what the provincial grade level expectations would need to be for that type of assignment. When we looked at all of the student exemplars as a full staff (which also served as an informal exercise in cross-graded and curricular scope and sequencing), we found some discrepancies in what we were expecting from our students. For example, with certain Grade 5 IMovies, when students were given numerous hours and opportunities to complete a representation of their curricular understanding, the work far exceeded what might have been a reasonable curricular expectation of a Grade 5 student. In fact, in some cases, a few of the IMovies resembled something of a Grade 7 or 8 standard. We then asked ourselves: Is it then fair to hold this Grade 7 standard up as a model of a Grade 5 achievement of “excellence”? Or, would it be better to suggest that *this* (above grade level exemplar) is

what might be achieved with an exceptional amount of time and dedication, but *here* (grade level) is a more reasonably targeted grade level exemplar to share with students?

The question then became: How much time do we give to students to complete an assignment or project to demonstrate core understandings and competencies in a subject area? If we hold exemplars up from projects to students, where an exceeding amount of time is given for an assignment, (and in some cases, we determined, too much time) do these models serve as accurate targets for students to achieve in a reasonable length of time, on their own, with a normal amount of teacher and parental support? What we determined in our post-activity discussion was that in some cases the form of representation media or technology was superfluous to the curriculum expectations. These projects did not help students to develop knowledge or even enrich the experience. Instead, it was a time-filler or an exercise in mastery that took multiple hours away from learning other valuable curriculum outcomes in their programs. We concluded that assignments, and in particular, larger projects, require careful attention by teachers to be sure that they support, are relevant and align with the curriculum outcomes. Otherwise, these end products became exemplars of work that might precipitate future assignments of the same type that are not necessarily valuable to the program.

We determined as a staff that when working with student exemplars, there is a strong need to look at our assignments very carefully in terms of how we set students up to succeed within them, and then in turn,



Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

create products that we can in turn hold up as examples for future generations of students doing similar work:

- 1) What are the curriculum outcomes that these types of assignments will demonstrate?
- 2) What will be the criteria by which we assess these outcomes?
- 3) How will we communicate and collaborate with students about the language of the curriculum and representational media/technology (ICT) outcomes (and other integrated curricula)?
- 4) What varying exemplars (varying standards of success) will we use to help promote students to identify and then attempt to rise higher on their own ladders of academic success?
- 5) How will we update our exemplars in light of ongoing student collaboration in any given project?

We all agreed that using student exemplars is a powerful way of holding up learning targets to assist students to better understand how to represent their understanding in various forms; however, when not thought-through, exemplars have the potential to mislead, and misrepresent how students should best learn their school programs. Therefore, we endeavor, as a teaching staff, to begin harvesting more student exemplars that consider very carefully these fundamental questions about the use of exemplars in our programs.

### **Promoting Exemplary Teaching and Learning in the Calgary Science School**

Dr. Garry McKinnon, Superintendent

As charter schools, we have a special mandate in Alberta to provide specialized learning experiences for students in keeping with our school's vision, mission and charter as well as to share exemplary teaching practices and innovations with other schools. Although we have this common mandate, each charter school is unique. Over a period of several months beginning with our staff retreat at the beginning of the school year in August, the Calgary Science School has been reflecting on our mandate and in the spirit of inquiry, we have been exploring the question, "What does exemplary teaching and learning look like in the Calgary Science School?". In addressing this question, reference was made to the work that has been done on student assessment through our AISI project; the Galileo longitudinal research study of the Calgary Science School one-on-one laptop program and student engagement initiatives; the expectations for exemplary teaching outlined in the Alberta Teaching Quality Standard and a variety of artefacts including school evaluation reports, survey data and the fundamental framework as a school outlined in our charter. Students and parents along with school staff members were involved in the process of developing descriptors of exemplary teaching and exemplary learning in the Calgary Science School.

In reflecting back, the process itself was very worthwhile. Sixteen descriptors of exemplary teaching and learning emerged and laminated posters with these competencies of exemplary teaching and



Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

exemplary learning were unveiled at the February, 2011 staff retreat and at a general assembly of the students. The posters have a prominent place in every classroom and in gathering areas throughout the school and the intent is that they will be referred to on an ongoing basis and will serve as a reminder of the nature of our commitment to exemplary teaching and learning as a charter school community.

The descriptors of exemplary teaching and learning connect to 16 areas while at the same time addressing several questions - Who we are. What we do. How we do it. Why we do it.

1. Relationships
2. Culture of Innovation
3. Student and Staff Wellness
4. Parents as Partners
5. Communication
6. Inquiry Based Practice
7. Technology Enhanced Learning and Teaching
8. Meaningful Curriculum Implementation
9. Authentic Assessment
10. Environmental and Outdoor Education
11. Collaboration
12. Research Focus

13. Leadership
14. Professional Development
15. Student Success
16. Engagement in Learning

A full explanation of this template and other copies of the documents are available on the Calgary science school webpage ([www.calgaryscienceschool.com](http://www.calgaryscienceschool.com))

The members of the school leadership (administrative) team, are using the descriptors of exemplary teaching as a framework for teacher supervision and evaluation and the recruitment and selection of teaching staff members. Teachers have been encouraged to make reference to the framework in developing their Professional Growth Plans and in soliciting ongoing feedback from their students. A professional growth plan template and a student survey (Survey Monkey and Google Forms versions) have been prepared for this purpose. The exemplary teaching and learning descriptors will also be used as a focal point in articulating the education plan for the next school year. Students and teachers are invited to Board of Directors meetings to share exemplars of the exemplary teaching and learning dimensions. As well, the Calgary Science School Webpage has a special section of blogs and video highlights under the heading **Connect!**.

As a school community, these descriptors are seen as living documents, which will continue to evolve. During a two-week period in March, as a component of the ongoing school evaluation process, in complement to





Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

exemplary teaching and learning professional development work that we are doing at the school, I was involved as superintendent in a process of interviewing all of the school staff members, all of the students (as class groups) and over 40 parents who were at the school for student-led conferences. The basic format was to seek responses to the questions, "What causes you to believe that the Calgary Science School is a great school and what suggestions for improvement would you have to offer?" The interviews generated a great deal of feedback which was organized through a thematic analysis process on the basis of "Areas of Commendation" and "Suggestions for Further Consideration." Interestingly, all of feedback received reinforced the efficacy of our 16 descriptors of exemplary teaching and exemplary learning. As well, through the process a number of strategies for further enhancement were identified.

Based on our experience, we would recommend that each charter school give serious consideration to becoming engaged in a similar process of describing their uniqueness through articulating what exemplary teaching and learning looks like in their school and using it as a framework for further professional development and enhancement.

## Calgary Girls' School

### Inquiry Based Learning.

The Calgary Girls' School is committed to the notion that humans are driven by inquiry: they have a need to



know. Our ultimate goal is to develop in our girls the knowledge, abilities, attitudes and processes necessary to discover the answers to their questions, to develop other questions and to enter the world of life-long learning. "Inquiry based learning" is therefore the pedagogical approach selected to achieve this goal. Collaboration is the hallmark of the work that teachers do together. For examples of the inquiries, rubrics and student work, please access our grade group wikis at:

<https://wiki.calgarygirlsschool.com/groups/>

In the winter of this year, two CGS teachers were invited to participate in the Pacific Institute for the Mathematical Sciences (PIMS) Banff International Research Station for Mathematical Innovation and Discovery: Teachers as Stakeholders in Mathematics, Education and Research. They spent a week at the Banff Centre as 2 of 6 teacher representatives amid an international team of mathematicians and educational theorists.

Additionally, our teachers' work can be found on iTunes U, a new venue for CGS teachers to share their work internationally.

**Digital Citizenship Symposium.** In January, the school hosted a Digital Citizenship Symposium. Special guest Mayor Naheed Nenshi participated digitally through Elluminate, a format that allowed him to respond directly to students' questions about his thoughts on the influence of social media on his campaign, his beliefs about how social media lend themselves to participatory democracy, and other questions. Besides school-wide CGS participation, there was on-site participation of students from David



Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

Thompson Middle School (CBE), and digital participants included a girls' school in Massachusetts and a school from Stony Plain. The event garnered significant Twitter activity amongst the educational community and moderator Alec Couros ably facilitated face-to-face and digital conversations amongst panel members and audience. The panellists ranged from Dr. Michele Jacobsen from the University of Calgary to young entrepreneurs and social activists. This was followed by ongoing inquiry work at different grade levels. In particular, the Grade 7 students and teachers investigated a question around creating the perfect social network – a topic that has resulted in rich discussion and interest. Some of the planning and background work is visible on the above-named wiki. For a synopsis of the digital symposium, please click on: <http://brendadee.posterous.com/the-future-arrives-in-calg>.

**Dance and Music Programs.** The eighty girls in our dance program participated in an original work entitled "The Life of a Girl". The work was comprised of nine different dances based on the issues and experiences that are part of the world of girls and women. Additionally, our choirs from both campuses performed at Choral Fest and the Kiwanis Music Festival. Our Grade 4 Choir was chosen to represent Calgary at the Provincial Music Festival in May. The Concert and Symphonic Bands ably represented CGS at the Alberta Band Festival in February.

### Important Dates

**October 19, 2011** –  
TAAPCS Regular Meeting & AGM, Coast Plaza Hotel, Calgary

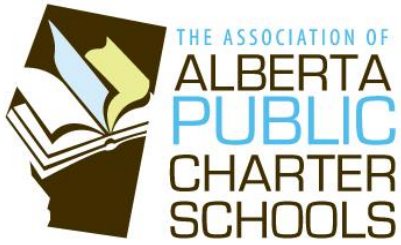


**October 20, 2011** – TAAPCS Pre-conference and Conference, Coast Plaza Hotel, Calgary

**October 21, 2011** –TAAPCS Conference break-out sessions at various schools TBD

*Best wishes for a restful, enjoyable and safe summer vacation.*





Working together to support choice and innovation in public education.

