

Growing the Charter Movement

TAAPCS Annual Report 2020-2021

October, 2021
www.taapcs.ca

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Ron Koper, Chair

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Background

The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools represents all of Alberta's 15 charter schools. Charter schools are public schools under the *Education Act*, and, as such, provide to parents and guardians a choice for their child(ren)'s education. Charter schools help Alberta satisfy the following statements from the Preamble of said *Education Act*: "*WHEREAS parents have the right and the responsibility to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children; WHEREAS parents have prior right to choose the kind of education that may be provided to their children.*" Alberta is the only province or territory in Canada to legislate charter schools.

The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools' 15 members are located in a wide geographic and demographic area which extends from Medicine Hat in the south to Valhalla Centre in the north. As well, there are seven schools in Calgary and five schools in Edmonton and area. The mandate of each school is unique and distinctive. The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools was formally created to support all charter schools regardless of location and mandate. (www.taapcs.ca)

Foundational Statements

TAAPCS VISION

Working together to support choice and innovation in public education

TAAPCS OBJECTIVES

1. To promote and facilitate public charter school education in Alberta
2. To advocate collectively and effectively on behalf of the membership
3. To promote a forum for public charter schools to meet in support of common goals
4. To advocate for continued innovation and choice within public education

TAAPCS VALUES

1. What's best for student learning
2. What's correct
3. What strengthens learning communities
4. What sustains exemplary public education

Meeting Dates

The Annual General Meeting for the Association took place on October 24, 2020

The Spring General Meeting was held on May 8, 2021.

Committee Meetings are under Committee reports.

TAAPCS Chair Report

Responsive to member feedback, the TAAPCS Annual Report will appear streamlined and focused compared to prior years. This reflects the operation of many schools over the last year, also streamlined and focused. Paying close attention to what's most critical, focusing resources and working hard for progress is the reality we have faced in all schools.

The functioning of the association continued to improve steadily; although this may have been difficult to see due to reduced opportunities for communication. Other than holding meetings virtually, we have not made specific Covid-adjustments in the basic communication channels used in the association. This places a heavier reliance, arguably unfairly so, on superintendent communication. Replacing the substantial dialogue and interaction we enjoy at face-to-face Spring General Meetings, or Annual Meetings is not something that we have pursued to date.

We worked throughout the year within the communication structure and strategic focus the organization has historically maintained. The committee work intended to clarify the strategy and re-ground it in the evolving shared aspirations of membership, has not been conducted. Until we can meet again as an association, the generative dialogue needed to undertake this work is very difficult to achieve. Operating consistently with our espoused purpose, mission, vision, values and strategies has produced steady progress, albeit more slowly than ideal for some members.

We continued to focus on reinforcing governance of public charter schools by promoting and engaging in opportunities to shape the regulatory and administrative practices influencing education in a positive direction. Aligning regulation and administration to the significant legislative change undertaken in the last two years has been a continual focus and is a daunting challenge for everyone in the educational community. We have reinforced the governance of TAAPCS through reliance on the key committee structures to undertake operations and move the association forward. Increasing legislative, regulatory and administrative alignment will continue to increase the effectiveness of public charter school governance.

We have continually worked toward speaking with one voice, while recognizing and embracing the significant diversity across the TAAPCS membership. Our efforts continued to open opportunities to work together on shared member aspirations for choice and full engagement in public education. Messages that we have been placing into the public communication channels are beginning to resonate differently. As the identity of public charter schools continues to grow, our consistency will open opportunities for positive collaboration and growth. We already see these opportunities increasing within many of our association and educational partnerships. This trend of increasing opportunity will continue as our communications become more integrated and effective.

Over the year, notwithstanding the challenges of the economy and the pandemic, we also continued to make progress on the essence of our existence as public charter schools, research informed innovation and growth. The important and significant gains in research informed innovation across charters have been organic in nature, tied to the very essence of each charter and its interaction within the broader community. It has been rewarding to see that all members have pushed for progress and significant milestones have been reached. Public charter schools will be better positioned to innovate and share innovation as a result of the gains made this year. Given the broad and sweeping forces facing us all this year, that's an exceptional achievement.

The association has benefited enormously from the sustained contribution members have made over the past years. In particular, the generous efforts of our President Dale Erickson, our Vice President Chris Gilmour, our Treasurer Cole Jordan, and our Priorities Committee Chair Dan Hanson who are retiring after years of service to TAAPCS. It has been a privilege to serve the association alongside these gentlemen. TAAPCS is truly grateful for the leadership and passion you have invested in the shared success of our association. Thank you.

Ron Koper, TAAPCS Chair

TAAPCS EXECUTIVE 2020-2021

Ron Koper, Chair	Connect Charter School
Jenny Hill, Vice-Chair	Foundations for the Future Charter Academy
Dale Erickson, President	Calgary Arts Academy
Chris Gilmour, Vice-President	Connect Charter School
Lynne Paradis, Secretary	Suzuki Charter Academy
Cole Jordan, Treasurer	Calgary Arts Academy
Dan Hanson, TPC Chair	New Horizons Charter School
John Picard, TAAPCS Executive Director	

Message from the Executive Director and Officers

Looking back on the 2020/2021 school year, the Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools has experienced been both highs and lows, with many challenges but also some refreshingly hopeful new opportunities. In spite of the unusual circumstances of the past school year, resulting in excessively high demands on the time and energy of boards, administration and staff at all levels, we have been able to see the continuous growth of the charter school movement in a number of ways.

TAAPCS Executive

TAAPCS Executive met with the Minister of Education and her Chief of Staff on two occasions. Discussions were related to growth and opportunities for public charter schools and the challenges faced by public charter schools in fulfilling their mandates. The Minister also met with groups of Charter School superintendents and board members on two occasions in the past year.

We are grateful for the positive working relationship we have with the Minister and her team, for the development and improvement of choice in education and for the approval of two new charter schools in Alberta. We were delighted the Minister accepted our invitation to speak at the opening of the 2021 Charter School Conference.

Deputy Minister

Charter School Superintendents were invited to several meetings with the Deputy Minister and other members of the Ministry. We worked together to facilitate opportunities for choice. Our conversations and deliberations focused on:

- a. The evolution of the assurance and accountability process for charter schools
- b. Opportunities for regular ‘check-ins’ in addition to the annual reports
- c. The evaluation process at the end of the charter school mandate
- d. SLS funding for charter school support of students with special needs
- e. Facilitating the government’s commitment for choice

Partnership Meetings

The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (President and Executive Director) were invited to join with six other stakeholder groups (ATA, College of Alberta School Superintendents, Alberta Independent Schools and Colleges Association, Association of School Councils of Alberta, Alberta School Boards Association and the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta) for regular meetings with the Minister and Deputy Minister. These meetings focused on emerging issues throughout the year.

Curriculum Development

The charter school community has responded to the call for engagement with the new curriculum, with an eye to providing feedback regarding areas of strength and suggested improvements. Two schools are piloting the curriculum and eight of our schools are participating in a curriculum engagement process facilitated by Calgary Consortium.

New Charter Schools

While the focus of charter schools this past year, as with every school jurisdiction in Alberta, was on managing the impact of the Covid pandemic on students, there was also opportunity to celebrate as two new charter schools were confirmed and began preparations for start-up in September 2021.

New Humble Community Charter School is located in Calmar, Alberta, fostering the growth of each student through innovative academics, stewardship and agriculture literacy. New Humble Community Charter School opened with 94 students, Kindergarten to Year 6.

STEM Innovation Academy opened in Calgary with a focus on STEM programming (Science, technology, engineering and math) as well as curriculum development. STEM Innovation Academy opened with 409 students in grades 7 to 9 and is planning to provide High School programming, increasing enrollment to 1000 students.

Research

Research initiatives and partnerships experienced limited growth due to the pandemic.

Charter School Parent Advocacy Group

Independent of TAAPCS, Charter school parents have formed an advocacy group to facilitate open communication and have participated in regular meetings, the annual general meeting and the conference held by the Association of School Councils of Alberta.

Charter School Conference:

“Future Focused: Where Instructional Design, Learning and Equity Intersect”

Planning for the bi-annual Charter School Conference was a positive and forward-looking activity for teachers and administrators, in collaboration with the Calgary Regional Consortium. The October 22, 2021 Zoom conference is sponsored and hosted by the Calgary Girls Charter School. Several distinguished guest speakers will be in attendance.

Internal Growth and Development

The provincial Charter School community met by Zoom on two occasions. The Annual General Meeting was held on October 24, 2020 and the Spring General Meeting was held on May 8, 2021. Committee reports (Priorities Committee, Executive Committee, Superintendents / Secretary

Treasurers committee) school presentations, Public charter school recognition awards and relevant topics of discussions were agenda items.

Dale Erickson, President
Chris Gilmour, Vice-President
John Picard, Executive Director

Awards and Recognition

The 2020 TAAPCS Board of Governors Awards

Alberta's public charter schools have a long and successful history of innovative and effective practice. As important players on the landscape of public education, charter schools have played a pivotal role in providing choice to families in the education of Alberta's children. Today and during the past, the association has benefited from the efforts of many supporters from within our organization. The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS) initiated the Board of Governors' Award to recognize and thank those from within the association who have given their time, energy, influence and expertise to enhancing the charter school promise. Two individuals were recognized in 2020 at the TAACS AGM.

Don Falk

Don Falk is an iconic professional in the field of education and Charter Schools in Alberta. After a full and distinguished career in education, including serving as the Superintendent of Red Deer Public Schools, Mr. Falk, spent seven of his first nine years of "retirement" in service of the New Horizons Charter School Society (NHCSS). In that time Don became a well-known and vocal advocate of the Charter Schools in Alberta.

In seven short years Mr. Falk lead NHCSS from a small k – 9 school of one class per grade, no vice principal, and less than 200 children, to a thriving school in a newly renovated permanent home, a budding population of over 400 students, a full-time vice principal, a significant increase in teachers and staff and soon to be 2 classes per grade. In fact, New Horizons is now at a point of being able to consider a full time high-school program thanks in no small part to the leadership of Don Falk.



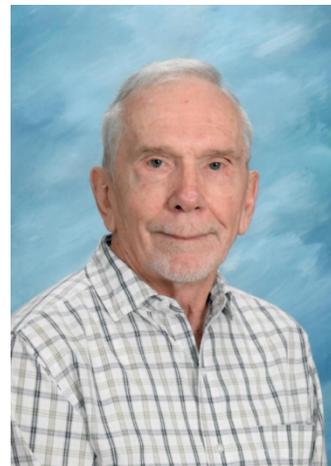
Mr. Falk's leadership and professionalism is exemplary. As with any notable professional Don has a natural gravitas that sets a tone and expectation of excellence from those who work with him. His preparedness, his command of the facts, his thoughtful and gentlemanly nature elicits a well-earned trust from those around him. It is these characteristics, and his ability to make a fact-based argument with a passionate flair that has accelerated NHCSS's growth, while maintaining the highest quality of education. All this while managing a \$8M enhancement project for the school, and serving on the Board of the Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS) as Co-Vice President and Secretary.

Don's dedication to his work and his community is self-evident as you consider that on becoming Superintendent for NHCSS, he also immediately, and for the full duration of his employment, became an active member at TAAPCS. Never did Mr. Falk just show up for work. He came prepared to understand the needs of his school, and the needs of charter schools and became a passionate advocate for the needs of our community.

Thanks Don!

Paul Gibson

Paul Gibson is just one of a large family of people that truly believe in the charter school and the benefits it brings to the students and stakeholders in Valhalla Centre. He is one of those people that makes a rural community what it is, and one of those people that hold it together. From the beginning of the Valhalla Community charter school, he has volunteered his time and his support, initially in the background, to make the dream of a charter school real and to develop a culture that fits the vision and mission of the school, centered around rural leadership and community involvement, which he helped to develop. Over the years, Paul has supported the school in a multitude of ways. He developed, evolved, and continues to manage, the school website. He mans the radio exchanges for the four school buses that transport students back and forth each day, a critical component of a rural school in northern Alberta. Eventually, Paul agreed to join the Board of Directors, and brought his management and policy background to bear on the work of charter development and renewal in a crucial time. He then took on the role of TAAPCS representative, and for several years brought both his wit and his considerable experience to TAAPCS meetings, and in particular, to the work of the important Communications Committee.



Paul Gibson is an exemplary volunteer member of the Valhalla Community School, TAAPCS, and the whole charter school community. He is a most deserving recipient of the Board of Governors award for 2020.

Thanks Paul!

Reports of Committees

Executive Committee

The Executive Committee meets regularly to consider high level decisions proposed by the Executive Director along with the Priorities Committee and the group of Superintendents and Secretary-Treasurers. The Executive Committee is composed of the Chair, Vice-Chair, Chair of the Priorities Committee, the four officers (President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer) along with the Executive Director. In addition to regular meetings, members of the Executive Committee have met with the Minister of Education on three occasions in the past year, and represent TAAPCS at meetings with the Deputy Minister as well.

Priorities Committee

The Priorities Committee has the mandates of Communication, Board Professional Development, Policy and Awards and Recognition. The Priorities Committee meets monthly with December and summer breaks, and has a minimum of one representative from each charter school. The Priorities Committee would particularly like to thank Dan Hanson for his work in chairing this committee over the past two years.

Superintendents and Secretary-Treasurers Committee

The Superintendents and Secretary-Treasurers Committee has met numerous times over the past year. Meetings have been held in both scheduled and impromptu fashion to respond to the various initiatives of the Ministry and discussions and negotiations of concern to all charter schools. Through this Committee, chaired by the President, Dale Erickson, items related to the internal functioning of TAAPCS as well as common concerns and issues arising related to Alberta Education and schools are discussed regularly. Meetings were held in November 2020, and January, February, March and June 2021.

Research Support and Promotion

During the 2020–2021 school year, research in Charter Schools was impacted considerably by the pandemic. Challenges emerged with data collection, university protocols and the reality that all schools were consumed with priorities for managing COVID-19. This resulted in a slowing of existing research projects. Further, the opportunities to initiate new projects were limited largely to investigations that focussed on managing COVID-19 (including shifts from onsite to online education). Charter Schools who were involved with post-secondary partnerships (for example, the national Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grants) and completed the minimum reporting to meet grant requirements. Involvement with the Alberta Research Network continued but was limited to sharing of developments with existing projects.

Discussions on strategies to promote research that is occurring in Charter Schools were explored with a tentative plan developed to create a short promotional video and/or documents that capture the intent of research in Charter Schools and highlight some of the developments over recent years. This promotional information is intended to capture new and ongoing research projects but to also identify positive outcomes from the application of past research (both locally and internationally) in the implementation of programs in Charter Schools that has had positive impact on student learning (for example, connections between international research on the positive overall effect of fine arts learning and math achievement). The overall intent of the initiative is to provide all Charter Schools and the general public with an accurate account of what active research in Charter Schools involves and to highlight where research initiatives have made a positive contribution to the discipline of education.

Submitted by Lynne Paradis and Pam Davidson Co-Chairs, TAAPCS Research Support and Promotion Committee

Alberta Public Charter Schools

Almadina Language Charter Academy / Calgary

Focus: English as a Second Language

Kindergarten to Grade Nine / 1213

Aurora Academic Charter School / Edmonton

Focus: Traditional Education

Kindergarten to Grade Nine / 870

Boyle Street Education Centre / Edmonton

Focus: At-Risk Youth

14 to 19 Years Age Group / 95

Calgary Arts Academy / Calgary

Focus: Arts Immersion Curriculum

Kindergarten to Grade Eleven / 496

Calgary Girls Charter School / Calgary

**Focus: Delivering Exceptional Learning in a Safe Environment Creating Generations
Of Strong Confident, Empowered Women**

Grade Four to Grade Nine / 501

Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence

Medicine Hat / Focus: Academically Capable Underachievers

Kindergarten to Grade Nine / 272

Connect Charter School / Calgary

Focus: Inquiry- based, technology rich, with outdoor and experiential education

Grade Four to Grade Nine / 624

Foundations for the Future Charter Academy / Calgary

Focus: Academic Excellence and Character Development

Kindergarten to Grade Twelve / 3549

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School

Leduc County / Focus: Traditional Indigenous Teachings

Kindergarten to Grade Nine / 42

New Horizons School / Sherwood Park

Focus: Gifted Education

Kindergarten to Grade Nine / 430

New Humble Community School / New Humble

Focus: Agriculture and Stewardship

Kindergarten to Grade Six / 94

STEM Innovation Academy / Calgary

Focus: STEM Education and Curriculum Design

Grades Seven to Nine / 409

Suzuki Charter School / Edmonton

Focus: Suzuki Approach to Academic, Musical and Personal Excellence

Kindergarten to Grade Eight / 382

Valhalla Community School / Valhalla Centre

Focus: Rural Leadership and Direct Instruction

Kindergarten to Grade Nine / 87

Westmount Charter School / Calgary

Focus: Gifted Education

Kindergarten to Grade Twelve / 1312

Charter School Facts

Alberta Charter Schools are Public

Charter schools in Alberta are public schools. We receive slightly less per student funding and cannot charge tuition or be religiously affiliated. Teachers are certified in the same manner as all other public school teachers in the province, and students follow the mandated provincial Programs of Study.

Alberta Charter Schools give parents a Choice

Charter schools are an important element of the strength and quality of educational in Alberta, one of many options providing choice to parents in the province. Parents who choose charter schools subscribe to the mission and educational approach of the charter school their children attend.

Alberta Charter Schools give parents a Voice

Charter schools are autonomous from other educational jurisdictions, and are governed by non-profit societies with boards elected by members of the society. Charter schools provide for the opportunity for parents to participate in a unique way in the education of their children, including voting for board directors as members of the society. Parents have a strong voice in charter schools and the overall engagement of the various stakeholders in a charter school community is exemplary.

Alberta Charter Schools are Accountable

Charter schools are accountable directly to the Minister of Education through their mandated model of governance. Each charter school has an elected Board of Directors, teaches to the regular Programs of Study of the province, and reports annually to the Minister through their Annual Education Plan and their Annual Educational Results Report. Finances are subject to an annual audit, which is posted on the Alberta Education website. In addition, charter schools are subject to regular and rigorous evaluations by researchers from the Minister of Education.

Alberta Charter Schools are Innovative

Charter schools are innovative by definition and by their very nature. Charter schools are approved by the Minister of Education on the basis of an innovative approach to teaching and learning. In addition, charter schools, due to their level of autonomy, tend to be nimble and responsive to improved ways of delivering education to their students based on both action research and formal research done at the school.

Alberta Charter Schools have a Research Mandate

Charter schools have a particular mandate to do research on the educational strategies employed with their students. Supported by partners in Alberta Education as well as Universities, Charter schools undertake various forms of research and cooperate together to share their findings.

Alberta Charter Schools are Diverse

Charter schools meet diverse educational needs. Due to the variety of programming offered in the different charters, charter schools offer specialized programming that supports all types of learners. These range from learning challenged to gifted, and from second language to mature learners, as well as offering specialized programming for the arts, the sciences, and gender specific approaches to teaching and learning.

The Last Word

The world has changed so much in the past year and a half. Freedom to gather and to pursue activities as simple as going for coffee that we took for granted, we now see as privileges, and realize how privileged we have been as a society. It provides us with a good opportunity to be grateful and to understand how fragile things can be. Such is also the state with educational choice and with charter schools. Parents having the opportunity to choose the education that is best for their child is a privilege that should be considered a right, but that many would like to eliminate in favor of one monolithic system imposed on all. The Choice in Education Act is landmark legislation in Alberta founded on the principles that “parents have the right and the responsibility to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children” and “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that may be provided to their children.”¹ May we realize what a privilege that is and consider it a right to be protected. With the expansion of choice in Alberta through legislation and, this year, the addition of two new charter school options, the future looks bright.

Thank You

The TAAPCS Officers group of Superintendents and Secretary-Treasurers have been ably led and represented by Dale Erickson in the role of President and Chris Gilmour in the role of Vice-President, over the past three years, as well as Cole Jordan in the role of Treasurer in the past two years. They have been a great help to me and of great service to the charter school community. We are extremely grateful to them, and to Dan Hanson, who has filled the role of Chair of the Priorities Committee since its inception.

Gentlemen, thank you for your service!

John Picard, Executive Director

¹ Education Act, Preamble

