

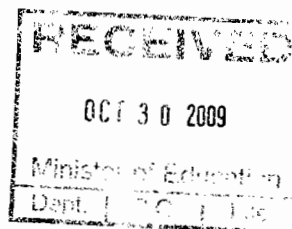
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October 30, 2009

The Honourable Dave Hancock
Minister of Education
Office of the Minister
Education
224 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6



Dear Minister Hancock

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the *School Act* review and the *Charter School Concept Paper*. The invitation to submit the Board's position proved to be an opportunity to review our values, consider options for the future and to express our commitments. Public education is the only publicly funded education system that welcomes all students, no matter their social, cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds.

We trust that the new *School Act* will strengthen the role of elected school boards, as the means of ensuring a responsive and responsible system for every student, parent and community member. Our Board has a long history of demonstrating these attributes in the Edmonton. The District has been an incubator for many educational innovations. We have established collaborative local, national and international partnerships with other education institutions and work closely with community organizations to coordinate enhanced services and supports for students and their families. We have a strong infrastructure for capacity building and knowledge sharing.

In relation to the *Charter School Concept Paper*, the Edmonton Public School Board has a long history of innovation, programs of choice and educational leadership, and as such, we support the return to a focus on innovation and creativity, not only in charter schools, but the entire education system. As a District we would welcome the opportunity to share what we have learned and continue to learn. We are committed to further involvement in a system that supports rigorous research and accountability for results.

Thank you again for the providing these opportunities to help shape the future of education in Alberta.

Sincerely,

Don Fleming
Board Chair

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Enclosures: Response to Charter School Concept Paper
Submission to the *School Act* Review

Edmonton Public Schools
Submission to the *School Act* Review
October 30, 2009

The Board believes that three main areas need to be included in any new provincial education legislation: 1) Defining Public Education, 2) A Focus on Success for All Students, 3) Establishing an Enabling Framework.

Defining Public Education

Alberta Education has recently increased funding to private educational institutions, straining the current understanding of what constitutes public education. What is it that the Alberta Education understands the roles of private, public, separate, francophone, charter and home education to be? The Edmonton Public School Board, in existence since 1881, holds firmly to principles and values that are hallmarks of its operations and believes that these values and principles must be embedded in the new *Act*. The Board expects the new legislation to affirm a commitment to public schools, which are mandated to accept and welcome all children, regardless of ability, ethnicity, culture, faith, language, socio-economic status, gender, or sexual orientation, as the foundation to realizing the province's aspiration for an educated, responsible citizenry.

Local Governance

Throughout this document it is assumed that locally elected school boards are vital to a responsive and effective education system. Local autonomy related to education and the delivery of programs belongs in the hands of school boards to ensure attention and responsiveness to the character and needs of the local community.

Access to Quality Education

The principle of access implies that all students are welcomed and included in schools and school districts. It also implies that school jurisdictions do all in their power to prevent any restriction of learning opportunities within the available funding.

Choice

It is understood that students learn in different ways. They receive, process and express new information and experiences in ways framed by personality, values and habit. Families also hold values about the role of education, how it is delivered, and what the outcomes of the education system should be. The new *Act* must provide the framework within which school jurisdictions provide a range of learning opportunities from which families and students choose the most appropriate pathway to success.

Equity

It is recognized that students come from diverse settings and backgrounds. These variable experiences mean that students come to school systems in different states of readiness to learn and participate in schooling. The education system must reduce the gaps between students with enriched and impoverished personal backgrounds.

Another aspect of equity relates to fairness in funding, especially as it relates to charter schools. For example, an arts focused charter school receives transportation funding, whereas a similar school in a public school district does not. This inequity must be addressed in the legislation.

Diversity

The new *Act* must recognize and value the diverse make up of students, families and staff members in the community and recognize that public schools will welcome any child regardless of ability, ethnicity, culture, faith, language, socio-economic status, gender, or sexual orientation and create safe, respectful learning environments for all.

Citizenship and Character Development

The role of citizenship and character development is crucial to social coherence and success. The *Act* should recognize the role schools and school boards play in developing young people prepared to fully participate socially, economically, and politically in their communities. The *Act* should also identify and provide ways for working with government departments and other agencies to enhance citizenship education.

A Focus on Success for all Students

The education system must ensure that the conditions for the success of all students are established and met. The following elements must be addressed:

- Ensure that the new *Act* is primarily focused on students and their success
- Consider both lowering the entry and increasing the exit compulsory age for schooling (i.e. make kindergarten compulsory, increase compulsory age from 16 to 18)
- Ensure cross-ministry and inter-agency support for integrated services that sustain students and families (including early education services, mental health and health supports, child welfare, justice services, etc.)
- Recognize that students require flexible programs that are not bound strictly by time (i.e. students may advance their programs as they are able, or they may need longer to complete programs of study)
- Recognize flexibility in student demonstrations of knowledge and skills
- Define levels of student success:
 - including the ability to successfully participate in a global knowledge community through such skills as critical thinking, creativity, second language acquisition
 - recognizing learning growth
 - recognizing the whole child
- Ensure parental and community partnership and involvement in the education process

Establishing an Enabling Framework

The new *Act* should address the following areas:

- Provide “natural person powers” to all school jurisdictions (This means that a board could undertake any initiative unless there is a prohibition against it in a new *Act*, currently boards are only allowed to do what is defined within the *School Act* and nothing more.)
- Establish enabling framework, rather than highly restrictive or prescriptive provisions (Create substantial outcomes and allow school jurisdictions flexibility in achieving those outcomes. For example, allow districts to select and hire a superintendent, without ministerial approval, allow districts to determine school closure procedures, allow districts to manage infrastructure projects for greater flexibility)
- Define the roles, rights and responsibilities for:
 - Students
 - Parents/guardians
 - Teachers
 - Principals
 - Secretary – Treasurers
 - Superintendents
 - Trustees
 - Partners (e.g. community members, Elders)
 - Alberta Education
- Financial flexibility related to borrowing for specific projects and revenue generating mechanisms (tax levy, sale of assets and services, other sources of revenue, etc.)
- Flexibility for local decision-making (i.e. locally developed courses and programs)
- Responsibility and accountability for results
- Allow for greater flexibility in the school calendar (e.g. August to May school year)
- The new *Act* should replace the highly regulatory sections with overarching outcome statements. These sections would be addressed through a system of regulations as determined by Alberta Education.
- School jurisdictions should be enabled to create its own charters or partnerships with other school jurisdictions, government departments and agencies to enhance use of research, innovation and creativity for educational opportunities for students.
- Ensure flexibility of transportation funding as block funding (and provide appropriate walk limits for students at various ages.)
- Make the values and principles for government decision-making explicit

**Edmonton Public Schools
Response to Charter School Concept Paper
October 30, 2009**

History

The Edmonton Public School Board believes that the history of charter schools as described in the Concept Paper is an accurate representation of the development of charter schools across the province. However, we dispute the claim that charter schools appear to have provided enhanced learning outcomes compared to other similar schools and compared to similar students enrolled in other jurisdiction types. We would be interested in the evidence that supports this claim. We know that, in the last decade, a number of education critics - especially those advocating a system of educational vouchers or charter schools - have argued that the most significant barriers to educational improvement are political or structural. It was believed that charter schools, that are largely freed from national, provincial, and district mandates and that have neither unions nor bureaucracy, would be able to achieve significantly improved student learning outcomes. There is yet to be any undisputed data that makes the case that charter schools are getting better results than conventional public schools with comparable populations of students. In fact, we maintain that the hope of charter schools has clearly been realized within our District, and that most of the charter schools in existence gained from our experiences as we shared significant information about our processes with them.

We also believe that, while charter schools have become a well established part of the public school system, their establishment has been unequal across the province, and especially in the Greater Edmonton Region. The Edmonton Public School Board has been able to provide the kind of innovation in program delivery that charter schools in other urban areas provide. Thus the claim that charter schools have provided enhanced choice in the system particularly in large urban centres may be true for Calgary, but certainly not for Edmonton.

Lastly, the concerns in the rest of the Alberta school systems about charter schools are mainly centered on the exemption of charter schools from the requirement to offer programming for all students. This needs to be addressed in the new legislation.

Vision

The Board agrees that we need a transformational vision of schooling across the province. The District currently functions as an incubator for many educational innovations. We have established collaborative local, national and international partnerships with other education institutions and work closely with community organizations to co-ordinate enhanced services and supports for students and their families. We have a strong infrastructure for capacity building and knowledge sharing. For example, we have established international partnerships with China, France, Germany and Spain to enhance research, staff development and delivery of bilingual education.

Resources

We strongly support the provision of additional resources required to enable schools and groups of schools to pursue the research expectations of this initiative and we advocate that the allocation of resources be accessible to any successful applicant.

Governance

In terms of the governance, we are pleased to see that public boards and separate boards would also be able to submit proposals. In these instances, the governance role must clearly be held by the elected School Board. We strongly advocate that any changes to the *School Act* would be enabling by removing unequal regulations regarding governance, operations and mandate between public and charter schools (such as ensuring transportation funding for charter schools also be applied to District programs of choice). We believe that an equitable approach might mitigate the implied and unsubstantiated assumption of limited innovation within the public system. In addition, public/separate school jurisdictions may be far more willing to learn from their colleagues.

We suggest that a change in name from “Charter Schools” to “Schools of Research and Innovation” would communicate more clearly the province’s intended direction. We also believe that granting of charters should be prioritized in light of their potential to support the province’s three year business plan. For example, innovative programming to enhance achievement outcomes for First Nations, Métis, Inuit (FNMI) and English language students to assist the province in addressing a provincial need.

We are highly supportive of working with post secondary research partners, and have already been working very closely with a number of different faculties at the University of Alberta to assess the impact of alternative methods of program delivery. We believe in partnerships and would be interested in entering into joint proposals with other schools in the province. For example, a rural urban partnership might increase equity of opportunity for program choice across the province.

We support the notion of a flexible term for each charter in keeping with the educational challenge the applicants intend to address. We do have some concerns about the “options to renew a school’s charter” included in the Governance section of the report. We believe that items C and D, “achievement results as good or better than provincial results” and “parent satisfaction at least as good as results for similar schools within public or separate boards” are not sufficiently precise nor rigorous enough as measures.

We believe that comparisons among schools should take into consideration the precise social vulnerability of the student populations in combination with achievement of student learning outcomes. Thus schools engaged in the new innovation to explore alternative way of achieving increased student learning outcomes would be measured statistically against schools with very similar populations. This comparison, called “Statistical Neighbors” is currently an initiative of Ontario Ministry of Education, and would be a much more suitable measure for the effectiveness of any charter schools. In Edmonton Public Schools, we are in the process of developing such a system to enhance our ability to more precisely determine school success and improvement.

The new regulations must consider student population equity. The composition of schools across the province is diverse, which should be reflected in any charter school. As a charter school is a school of choice, the provisions for students entering these programs must be as broad and inclusive as possible.

The evaluation of charters should be based on the achievement of mutually agreed upon measures that are appropriate to the challenge. For example, while a charter school serving a significant population of very high needs students might not be able to achieve “results as good as or better than provincial results as a whole” it should be held accountable for demonstrating significant growth in student learning and compare favourably to schools serving similar populations.