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October 30, 2009

Mr. Keray Henke
Deputy Minister
Office of the Deputy Minister
Alberta Education
7th fl Commerce Place
10155 - 102 Street
Edmonton, AB T5J 4L5

Dear Mr. Henke,

Re: Responses to Concept Paper and School Act Changes

On behalf of the Westmount Charter Board I am pleased to submit our responses to the Concept Paper and our suggestions for changes to the *Alberta School Act* as requested by you and Minister Hancock.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide our collective input into the educational changes that are being considered by government. Westmount Charter School has, through innovations and research, provided our gifted students, many who have been underachievers in past experiences, with the ability to grow and blossom into outstanding citizens of the world. The Board believes that, given the opportunity, Westmount will continue to provide educational leadership for our students and the broader educational community.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Laurie Westwood
Chairperson
Westmount Charter Board



Westmount Response to Charter School Concept Paper

At the invitation of Deputy Minister Keray Henke, what follows is a summary of some ideas that apply specifically to Westmount Charter School's focus on education for gifted students.

Westmount Charter School has since its inception, provided inclusive educational programs for gifted students, developed a school culture that promotes high student academic achievement and made special opportunities available for students to deepen their understanding of the global human condition. Alberta Education has conducted two evaluations over the last 14 years; both have offered glowing reports of Westmount's success in meeting and exceeding its charter goals. A further indicator of success is the continuing strong demand for positions at Westmount. Parents, teachers and students from Calgary and many surrounding communities choose Westmount for its successful programs and supportive teaching and learning environment.

Westmount is generally supportive of the ideas advanced in the Concept Paper; many of the elements in the new vision are already in place or under development here.

VISION:

The research and innovation undertaken by Westmount Charter School over the past number of years indicates our support for a revitalized future for charter schools. Innovative projects that Westmount has undertaken include:

- identification and admission practices which recognize the complexity of giftedness
- a strong emphasis on humanitarianism as a key component to the full social-emotional development of gifted adolescents
- intervention addressing the phenomenon of "gifted underachievement" via AISI projects
- special emphasis on the mentoring of new teachers
- development of "Communities of Practice" within the Westmount teaching staff, in which teachers share and create "best practices" in a specific aspect of gifted education
- gifted programming for grades 1-12, in a congregated setting
- sharing of curriculum focused innovations with teachers from Calgary Board of Education, Calgary Catholic School District, MT students at the University of Calgary and other educators from across Canada and globally

A strong working relationship with the Centre for Gifted Education, Faculty of Education at University of Calgary has led to involvement in several published research projects. In addition, Westmount educators have established relationships with other organizations and universities in North America and abroad and are beginning to present and publish their findings. Research projects that have involved Westmount include:

- "Exploring Self Concept: Examining Valence in Gifted Students"; Drs. Michael Pyryt and Sal Mendaglio, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary; April, 2007. Presented at Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association
- "Little Fish-Bigger Pond: Understanding Social Comparison Processes in a Congregated Gifted Setting"; Drs. Michael Pyryt and Sal Mendaglio, Faculty of Education, University of

Calgary; April, 2006. Presented at Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association

- "Does Awareness/Knowledge of Students' Physical Activity Increase Their Activity?", Westmount staff
- project on Creative Thinking, in collaboration with the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA
- "Active Living, Healthy Eating and Positive Social Environments in a Congregated Setting" a health and wellness initiative supported by a grant from Alberta Healthy School Community Wellness Fund, Westmount staff
- participation in a University of Calgary project, "Developing Vocabulary Profiles of K-12 Students" led by Dr. Hetty Roessingh, Faculty of Education
- lead Canadian school in the "Face to Faith" international videoconferencing project with the Tony Blair Foundation, Westmount staff
- "Implications for the Construction of Social, Physical and Cultural Environments that Encourage Learning", research on help-seeking and help-giving in science and environmental education; Dr. Bonnie Shapiro, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary
- developed locally developed courses, "Perspectives of the Human Condition 15-25-35"
- presentations on seven topics by Westmount educators at the 2009 World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children: Early Literacy, The Integration of Philosophy 30 and Physics 30, Gifted Learners and Physical Inactivity, Understanding the Impact of a Global Issues Awareness Program on Gifted Teens, The Importance of Integrating Outdoor Education with Core Curriculum, Goal Setting in High School Mathematics, and Improving Academic Performance of Gifted Underachievers
- 'Measuring Delivery Method Effectiveness in Critical Thinking', involving Social Studies 10, Westmount staff

GOVERNANCE:

Westmount would readily embrace a new vision for governance provided that the vision allowed for board membership to continue as a blend of parents from the Westmount School community and representatives of the gifted education and business communities. This current governance model has served our school community admirably through well-informed board members who provide policy guidance from the perspective of Westmount's charter goals. Board members are accountable to our stakeholders in the same manner as locally elected trustees. We would be supportive of a decision to enhance public acceptance of Westmount's election process through Ministerial approval of elected charter board members.

In summary, Westmount Charter Board supports a renewed vision for our charter school provided that we are given a more permanent status and additional funding to assist with the extra-ordinary costs associated with the continuation and expansion of our innovative practice and research projects.

Doing what is best for students is the core of decision-making at Westmount; it has been and will continue to remain our primary driving force. We believe that Westmount has already contributed to enhanced student success in the province and beyond. We look forward to a future where we can build upon these successes and continue to advance the cause of excellence in gifted education.

Changes to the Alberta School Act

Westmount Charter School

The following comments represent a consolidation of Westmount Charter Board's suggestions for changes to the Alberta *School Act*:

1. The new act should recognize charter schools as part of the regular public school system in all respects. **Charter schools are public schools** and should be accorded the same classification as all public schools in Alberta.
 - the *School Act* should be amended to allow charter schools to function in the same manner as other public schools with respect to funding and capital entitlements.
 - the new *School Act* should allow charter boards the right to delegate to superintendents the authority to sign employment contracts and other duties not permitted under current legislation.
2. Governance should be flexible and reflective of processes that serve each charter school community best as outlined in individual charter school bylaws. The current Westmount governance model is democratic, nimble and responsive.
3. We support the provision of "wrap-around" services for students wherein government departments provide services in a coordinated fashion.
4. School attendance has not been a significant problem for our students but we would support a process to improve enforcement of compulsory school attendance.
5. Superintendent appointments should ensure that appointees are accountable to the board.

Sincerely,

✓ Dr. Laurie Westwood, Chairperson
Westmount Charter Board