

Background Information

Action on Research and Innovation:
The Future of Charter Schools in Alberta

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Background Information on Charter Schools in Alberta:

The Government of Alberta established charter schools in 1994 as part of a larger initiative to provide choice and to foster innovation in the education system. Alberta is the only province in Canada that has charter school legislation. In the Alberta context, charter schools are publicly funded schools that provide a basic education in a different or enhanced way to improve student learning. Charter schools can only be operated by non-profit societies. They cannot have a religious affiliation, cannot turn students away as long as there is sufficient space and resources and cannot charge tuition or operate on a for-profit basis. They must follow the provincial curriculum and hire certificated teachers. The expectation for the educational services offered by charter schools is that they will be different from what is locally available.

Currently there are 13 charter schools in Alberta serving approximately 7,500 students and representing slightly more than one percent of Alberta's total K-12 enrolment. There is a legislated cap of 15 charter schools that may operate in any one school year. There are six charter schools in Calgary, three in Edmonton and four in smaller communities or rural areas. Approximately 83 per cent of the total charter school enrolment is located in Calgary, 11 per cent in Edmonton and the remaining six per cent outside of these two metro cities.

Charter schools operate under five year agreements, or charters. A charter is an agreement between the Minister of Education and a non-profit society regarding the establishment and administration of a charter school. The charter describes the unique educational service the school will provide, how the school will operate and the student outcomes that it intends to achieve. Charter schools may apply to the Minister for a renewal of the charter before the end of the term and the Ministry conducts at least one evaluation of a charter school within its term.

For further information on Charter Schools in Alberta, visit Alberta Education's website on Charter Schools at <http://education.alberta.ca/parents/choice/charter.aspx>.

Inspiring Action on Education

[Inspiring Action on Education: A Discussion Paper](#) sets out a vision for the future for education in Alberta. It is, "To inspire and enable students to achieve success and fulfillment as engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit within an inclusive education system." (page 7)

Inspiring Action on Education also outlines the value of innovation and research for the education system. "Creativity and innovation are central to achieving excellence in education. Learners, educators and governors must be creative, innovative and entrepreneurial to attain the highest possible standards" (page 8). "Research informs sound policy and decision-making. Education research underpins system change and is used to create the best possible learning environments for young people. Research that informs policy and practice is critical to the success of our students and to ensuring a bright future for all Albertans" (page 17).

What do we mean by innovation?

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provides a definition of the concept of “innovation”. Innovations can be new to the firm/educational institution, new to the market/sector, or new to the world. There are essentially four types of innovations: product innovation; process innovation; organizational innovation, and, marketing innovation. In the education sector, a product innovation can be a new or significantly improved curriculum or a new educational software or resource; a process innovation can be a new or significantly improved way of teaching; an organization innovation may be a new way of collaboration between teachers, or organizational changes in the administrative area, and, a marketing innovation can be a new way of promoting the innovation or a new strategy to recruit/maintain students.

What is the role of research in education?

An enhanced approach to research means:

- all stakeholders in the education sector use research to make evidenced-based decisions.
- research builds a solid foundation to focus educational change and policy development for improving student engagement and learning.
- research conducted by post-secondary institutions informs and is informed by student experiences, teacher practices and school and board-level work.
- leadership to champion research and development is foundational to innovation, growth and change.
- teachers and school communities undertake research to address local needs and priorities.
- student learning experiences are enhanced through the engagement of students and parents with researchers in research initiatives.
- teachers share and use findings to inform their practice.
- the education community understands global trends and accesses research to support personalized student learning” (*Inspiring Education, page 17*).

“Research and innovation will be encouraged and supported as part of a strong education system. Education research is integral to all parts of the education system, and all stakeholders will need to collaborate to conduct, interpret and apply research findings. Research partnerships will identify and expand our existing knowledge base regarding how students learn and how to facilitate the most appropriate learning environment” (*Inspiring Education, page 17*).

Introduction and Purpose of the Online Survey on the Future of Charter Schools of Alberta:

Charter schools can play an important part in fostering innovation and research to benefit students. In order to fulfill the vision of *Inspiring Action*, future charter schools will need to be defined by a different set of parameters than exists today in order to serve the needs of students and the entire education system in the years to come. It is time to review how the mandate of charter schools can be renewed in order for future charter schools to reach their full potential.

Since their establishment in 1994, charter schools have experienced various degrees of success. Alberta Education completed a review of the impact of Alberta's charter schools in 2007. The major findings included:

- a) Charter schools have provided enhanced choice in the system, both by providing it directly to families and by being one of the stimuli that has led other jurisdictions to offer more alternative programming. However, the provision of choice appears largely to have been limited to larger centres.
- b) Overall, charter schools appear to have provided enhanced student learning outcomes as compared to other similar schools and as compared to similar students enrolled in other jurisdiction types.
- c) One of the original purposes of charter schools was that they would be centres of innovation and would share innovations with the rest of the system. This purpose has largely not been realized.
- d) Charter schools have developed momentum, growing quickly since their inception, and now comprise over one per cent of the school population. Their waiting lists are such that more growth would take place were adequate facilities provided.
- e) There are concerns in the rest of the Alberta school system about charter schools and about where the movement is taking the system.
- f) Charter schools have become a well-established part of the public school system, and the consensus of those consulted during the review was that there is a need to develop a revised charter school governance model that addresses the legitimate concerns of both the charter schools and other stakeholders in the system.

The review concluded that it is time to reconsider the 1994 objectives for charter schools and to adjust these objectives so they are more attuned to today's education realities and intents. External groups have also examined charter schools in Alberta. One recent research study by the Canada West Foundation, entitled [*Innovation in Action: An Examination of Charter Schools in Alberta*](#) concluded that "Charter schools have not, however, been a resounding success. They have not been as innovative, or as influential, as possible. Nor will charter schools reach their full potential if the constraints in which they operate are not reassessed. Charter schools will only be able to achieve their full potential if their role in education is clarified and the remaining impediments to their operation are lifted."

In October 2009, Alberta Education released *The Charter School Concept Paper*, outlining a possible description of the next generation of charter schools that would serve as provincial innovative research centres. The *Concept Paper* envisioned the next-generation of charter schools as engaging in significant peer-reviewed educational research. Within this role, charter schools would augment and enhance the diversity of educational research and innovation taking place in and between classrooms, schools, school jurisdictions, post-secondary institutions, stakeholder organizations and the Government of Alberta.

The paper proposed that charter schools of the future would be expected to collaborate with other education stakeholders to:

- foster improvements in educational leadership, teaching and learning through innovation and research,
- share the results of their educational research and innovations to promote adaptation or adaption by other school authorities in the province,

- demonstrate how educational innovation and research are adapted or scaled for use in learning contexts in an inclusive educational system.

Feedback to the *Charter School Concept Paper* provided Alberta Education with valuable information. However, Alberta Education is looking for more structured and focused input through this online questionnaire. Your completion and submission of this document will provide us with important perspectives related to the direction for future charter schools in Alberta.