

Innovation in Action

An Examination of Charter Schools in Alberta

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Contents

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools:
Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools
in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools
Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School
Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools
Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter
Schools in Alberta

THE WEST IN CANADA PROJECT

Canada is a wonderfully diverse country with its people spread across the second largest nation-state in the world. There are many things that tie us together as Canadians, but there is no doubt that each part of the country is unique and brings a different set of characteristics and perspectives to the national table. Understanding and integrating this diversity is a challenge as big as Canada itself.

Western Canada—British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba—forms one of many distinct regions within Canada. The West is no more homogenous than any other region or sub-region, but there is an abundance of features that tie the four western provinces together in special ways. Shedding light on this region, communicating its frustrations and aspirations to the national community, seeking ways to build on the common ground found in the West, weaving the region into the national whole, and highlighting public policy innovation in the West are the goals of the West in Canada Project. The project, like Canada West Foundation, is based on the idea that strong and prosperous regions make for a strong and prosperous Canada.

For more information about The West in Canada Project, please contact Robert Roach (roach@cwf.ca).

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- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools:
Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter
Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools
Today
- ▶ Charter School
Challenges
- ▶ Charter School
Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter
Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter
Schools in Alberta

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alberta is the first, and only, Canadian province with charter schools. Following a worldwide trend in education reform, Alberta initiated legislation that established charter schools in May 1994. The first charter schools began operation in the fall of 1995 and charter schools continue to be a key part of the public school system in the province.

Despite this relatively long tenure, there is little awareness of charter schools in either Alberta or Canada. Few people understand what they are, why they were implemented or what they contribute to the provision of education in Alberta. This report explains why charter schools were introduced, how they operate and highlights some of the controversies, challenges and opportunities of charter schools. The hope is that increased understanding will facilitate greater and more profound discussion of charter schools and their role in public education in Alberta, and potential role in other Canadian jurisdictions.

Charter schools have succeeded in providing enhanced educational choice in Alberta and improved educational outcomes for their students. They do, however, face a number of challenges, including: an onerous periodic charter renewal process, limited access to facilities and an uncertain position in the educational community. These challenges inhibit the ability of charter schools to achieve their full potential. Given the opportunity, charter schools could become centres for educational research and development, facilitating the implementation of innovative educational strategies in schools across the province and the country.

Charter schools have become a well-established and successful component of Alberta's public school system. They have not, however, achieved their full potential and will not unless there are changes within the educational community and the legislative framework. The questions that should be guiding innovation in education are: What is necessary to ensure that Canadian education is second to none? How do charter schools help achieve this? In order to answer these questions, the debate over charter schools needs to move from the polemic to the profound something that can only happen when there is a better understanding of charter schools.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the most important tools for ensuring quality of life and economic success. Despite this, throughout the western world, student achievement results have stagnated while education spending has increased dramatically (Schlechty 2001; Carnoy 2000; Friedman 2006). The rising costs of education and the relatively poor return on investment have sparked waves of education reform. New Zealand dramatically reformed its education system in the 1980s and 1990s by abolishing all school boards and making each school responsible to the local parents, teachers and community (Fiske 2001). Other countries have used a more incremental approach, such as the introduction of charter schools, to reform education. Charter schools have been implemented, in various forms, in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom and are an increasingly popular education alternative. Since charter school legislation was first introduced in 1991, charter schools have expanded to 41 states and the District of Columbia. There are more than 4,600 US charter schools enrolling more than 1.4 million students (Bulkley 2004). Their popularity is based on features like small class sizes, high student achievement results and their ability to attract niche populations that are not well served in the traditional public school system.

So what are charter schools? All charter schools are autonomous *public* schools organized by groups of parents or educators. These groups band together with a vision to create choice in the philosophy, organization, governance and means by which education is delivered (Bosetti 2001). Charter schools have a great deal of flexibility in governance and administration. They remain, however, accountable to government for student achievement and the fulfillment of their specific charter mandate. They must demonstrate that their program is substantively different than programs already available and provide enhanced student learning in measurable ways. The charter school concept adheres to free-market principles. These assume that, given the option, parents will choose to enroll their children in successful and innovative schools and withdraw them from less responsive and less successful schools. This natural selection puts pressure on the public system to perform better and stimulate innovation as schools “compete” for students (Smith 2001).

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

Alberta is the first, and only, Canadian province to experiment with charter schools. Evidence shows the government became concerned about the state of education in the early 1990s and commissioned a report to study education reform. The report, entitled *Charter Schools: Provision for Choice in Public Schools*, found the absence of competition as the primary reason for “the failure of public schools to provide the level of excellence in education necessary for success in an increasingly competitive society” (Alberta Education 1993: 4). As a response, then Minister of Education Halvar Jonson introduced charter legislation as an amendment to the *School Act* in March 1994. The amendment included Section 32 which allowed the Minister to establish a charter school if the school had significant support, potentially improved the learning of students and another school board in the district was not already offering the program (Alberta Education 2002b). These conditions were imposed on charter schools because their purpose was to provide innovative or enhanced means of delivering education in order to improve student learning (Alberta Education 2002a).

Alberta charter schools incorporate all the general principles of charter schools outlined above but with distinctive features. Alberta charter schools can only be operated by non-profit societies. They cannot have a religious affiliation, cannot turn students away as long as there are sufficient space and resources and cannot charge tuition or operate on a for-profit basis. They must hire certificated teachers and follow the approved provincial curriculum. Alberta charter schools operate on five-year performance contracts, based on the terms of their charter, which is approved by the Minister of Education. In the third year of their term, an external evaluation team reviews all performance aspects of the school. These include its compliance with legal and financial requirements, fulfillment of charter objectives, and continued parent and community support. The evaluation team, relying on their findings, submits required and/or recommended changes to the charter school. These changes must be made within the next two years and the evaluation report, as well as evidence of changes, is included in the application for renewal. Based on this information, the Minister’s Technical Review Committee makes a recommendation for the charter renewal. The decision of the Minister of Education to renew a school’s charter or not is final and no appeal process exists (Alberta Education 2006).

This report examines Alberta charter schools in detail, including technical information, such as guiding legislation, structure, facilities and accountability measures. This is followed by a brief historical look at charter schools and an examination of charter schools, and their students, today. This information is then used as a springboard to understand the challenges and opportunities of charter schools, as well as the questions they raise.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools:
Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter
Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools
Today
- ▶ Charter School
Challenges
- ▶ Charter School
Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter
Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter
Schools in Alberta

2. METHODOLOGY

A variety of research techniques were used to collate information on charter schools. These included individual interviews with charter school administrators, board members and community leaders to collect information about the opportunities, challenges and future of charter schools. Group interviews and surveys were conducted with parents, teachers and students to understand the current state of charter schools and levels of satisfaction. Statistical information was analyzed to understand trends in student achievement, enrolment and demographic information. Finally, relevant literature, including government legislation and documents, education reports and stakeholder positions were analyzed to provide contextual and analytical depth.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

3. ALBERTA CHARTER SCHOOLS: TECHNICAL INFORMATION

In order to form a charter school, individuals or groups must approach their local school board to request the establishment of an alternative program of choice. The school board may meet the request either by demonstrating the existence of such a program or by working with the individuals to establish an alternative program. The school board may also refuse the request (Alberta Education 2002a). If the interested parties can demonstrate that the requested program is not offered, and the school board is unwilling to establish an alternative program, they may apply to the Minister of Education for charter status. The Minister reviews their request and may choose to approve or disapprove their application. Although there is no limitation on what kind of charter school can be established, they must demonstrate innovation in education and there is a legislated cap of 15 charter school boards in Alberta at any given time.

Charter Legislation

Charter schools in Alberta are legislated primarily under the *School Act*. Sections 31–38 deal specifically with charter schools, outlining regulations around operations, the rights of the Minister and the roles and responsibilities of all participants. Most other aspects of the *School Act* that outline the legislative framework for public schools also apply to charter schools. Some exceptions exist for students who are already provided for by the local school board. This includes an exemption from sections 44 and 47 of the *School Act*, meaning they are not required to provide services to all resident students or provide special education programs. Additional legislation, such as the *Charter Schools Regulation 212/2002*, details the contents of charters, renewal processes, charter board responsibilities, facilities access and termination regulations. The *Charter School Handbook*, updated in 2002, assists charter organizers in their planning and preparation by outlining the application requirements, school administrative structure and detailing the responsibilities of charter school boards, but is not legally binding.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

Organizational Structure

Charter schools are structured similar to public school boards but on a smaller scale. Boards of charter schools, who are either appointed by the society or elected from within the school community, are responsible for ensuring compliance with all board policies, the terms of the charter and provincial legislation, regulation and policies (Alberta Education 2002a). Boards are also accountable to the parents, students, community and the Minister for the fiscal management of the school and student achievement. Charter school boards must acquire the services of a superintendent who is approved by the Minister to fulfill provincially mandated functions. In addition to the superintendent, each charter school must have a school council comprised of parents, students and teachers, and a principal appointed by the board. The roles and responsibilities of the board, superintendent and principal are the same as with any other school jurisdiction, and are outlined in sections 19, 20 and 22 of the *School Act*.

Charter Accountability

Charter boards are responsible to the students, parents, community and the Minister of Education. Through annual reviews and the charter renewal process, the Minister ensures that schools are operating according to their charter and achieving all outcomes required by provincial legislation, regulation and policies. Charter schools are publicly accountable for student achievement and must make available annual reports and student results in Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) and Provincial Diploma Examinations (PDE). Additionally, they must publish the results of the Accountability Pillar measures, by which all school jurisdictions are evaluated by Alberta Education on an annual basis. The accountability requirements of charter school boards exceed those of local school boards because “charter boards are accountable for demonstrating that implementation of the charter goals has resulted in improved student learning outcomes and growth” (Alberta Education 2002a: 7).

Charter School Funding

Charter schools receive the majority of their funding on a per-pupil basis, the same as all other public schools. The government allocates a specific amount to each student, with variations to account for students with special needs, of different ages, language requirements, ethnicity, and so on. The base per-student instruction allocation for 2009/2010 is \$5,971.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

Charter schools also receive funding under the Small Board Administration Funding, which distributes money to school boards with relatively small student enrolment. The fund allocates a set amount to boards with fewer than 2,000 full time equivalent students in all school jurisdictions other than charters, and with fewer than 500 students in charter schools. The fund operates on a decreasing sliding scale for boards with more than the minimum, but fewer than 3,000 FTE students. No funds are given to boards with more than 3,000 students (Alberta Education 2009a). Figure 1 demonstrates how money is allocated to charter school boards and other school jurisdictions.

Figure 1 **Small Board Administration Allocation 2009/2010**

FTE Funded Enrolment	Charter Board Allocation	Public Board Allocation
Fewer than 500	\$190,036	\$461,594
Between 500 – 2,000	\$190,036 - \$347,536	\$461,594
Between 2,001 – 3,000	\$347,081 - \$0	\$461,132.40 - \$0
Greater than 3,000	No small board administration allocation	No small board administration allocation

Source: Alberta Education.

The rationale for the different funding allocation is that most charter schools have only one school site, making administrative costs lower. It does not, however, account for costs to charter schools not incurred by other school jurisdictions including superintendent fees, the charter renewal process and external evaluation and assessment.

Charter School Facilities

Charter schools can operate in a number of different facilities. There is an expectation that the facility will augment the philosophy and learning style of the school and it must comply with health, safety, fire and zoning legislation. They are able to own, lease, or rent the facility they choose (Alberta Education 2002a), although there are practical restrictions on what facilities are available to charter schools due to capital plan restrictions and legislative structure. The government provides money to charter schools through the Three-Year Capital Plan to lease facilities, stating that Alberta Education “may provide funding for the lease of facilities for the instruction of charter school students where a charter school does not have a facility” (Alberta Education 2009b: 45). The government outlines

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools:
Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter
Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools
Today
- ▶ Charter School
Challenges
- ▶ Charter School
Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter
Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter
Schools in Alberta

what kinds of facilities may be leased in order of preference, these include: space from a public or separate school jurisdiction, public/government space, or, barring the other two, a private facility.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

4. HISTORY OF CHARTER SCHOOLS IN ALBERTA

Until 2006, Alberta Education had received 34 charter school applications. Only 15 of these were successful, meaning that more than half of all applications were rejected. Three of these charter applications were ultimately accepted as alternative programs into the Edmonton Public School Board. Of the unsuccessful applications, nine came from Calgary, five from Edmonton, one from Lethbridge and four from rural communities (Alberta Education 2006). At least three charter school applications were rejected because of the principle of non-duplication. Although there is no legislation that prohibits duplicate, or similar, charter school programs this has become a *de facto* criterion. Charter schools are supposed to provide innovation and creativity in the provision of education in Alberta, therefore it is viewed as counter-productive to create duplicate programs, even if that educational program is not available in the applying community.

Timeline of Alberta Charter Schools

1994	Charter school legislation enacted
1995	New Horizons Charter School opens
	Suzuki Charter School opens
	Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence opens
1996	Westmount (ABC) Charter School opens
	Boyle Street Education Centre opens
	Almadina Language Charter Academy opens
	Aurora Charter School opens
	Global Learning Academy opens
1997	Moberly Hall Charter School opens
	Foundations for the Future Charter Academy opens
	Mundare Charter School opens
1998	Global Learning Academy closes
	Mundare Charter School closes
1999	Calgary Science School opens
2003	Calgary Arts Academy opens
	Calgary Girls' School opens
	Mother Earth's Childrens' Charter School opens
2007	Moberly Hall Charter School Closes
2008	Valhalla Community School opens

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools:
Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter
Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools
Today
- ▶ Charter School
Challenges
- ▶ Charter School
Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter
Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter
Schools in Alberta

Since charter school legislation was introduced in Alberta, there have been both successes and failures. Early on, two charter schools were closed due to financial difficulties. Global Learning Academy in Calgary began operations in the fall of 1996. At one time it was the largest charter school in Alberta. The Minister of Education placed it on notice and ultimately revoked its charter in 1998 due to financial mismanagement. A somewhat different situation developed with Mundare Charter School. Parents established it in 1997 after the closure of the elementary/junior high school in their small rural community. Due to low enrolment numbers the school fell into financial difficulty and was absorbed into the local public board the following year as a K-6 alternative program. Only one other charter school has closed since charters were introduced. Moberly Hall, the only charter school to be hosted by a Roman Catholic School board, was converted from a private school in 1997. It operated as a charter in Fort McMurray until 2007 when it did not apply for renewal due to declining enrolment and increased cost of operations. At that time, Moberly Hall hosted 75 students from grades 1-9. The majority of charter schools, however, have been successful by most standards and are the focus of the next section.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

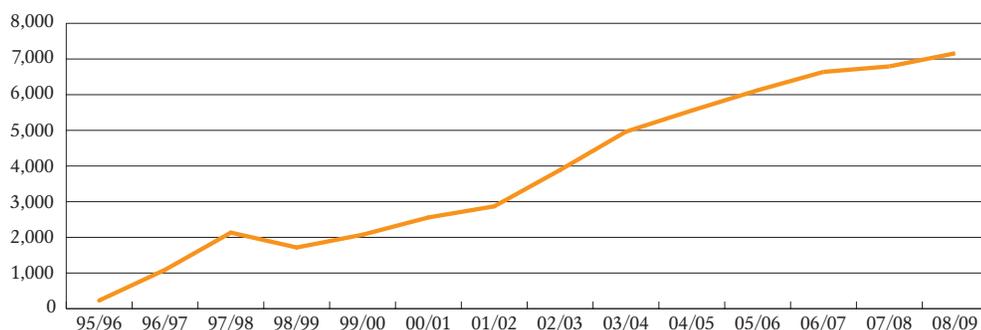
5. ALBERTA CHARTER SCHOOLS TODAY

There are currently 13 charter school authorities in Alberta operating on 22 campuses. They range from large to small, rural to urban, and endorse a wide range of educational philosophies (see Appendix A). All charter schools are represented provincially by the umbrella organization, The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS). The organization promotes and facilitates public charter school education and represents the common goals of charter schools in the community and to the government.

Student enrolment in charter schools has progressively increased. In the first year of charter school operations, three schools served 230 students. By 2000, that number had grown to 2,074 students. By 2008/2009, charter school enrolment was 7,161 (Figure 2). Since inception, there has only been one decrease in enrolment, which took place in 1998. This decrease was due to the closing of Global Learning Academy and Mundare Charter School. At that time, Global Learning Academy was the largest charter school in Alberta with 480 students.

Figure 2

Student Enrolment in Charter Schools



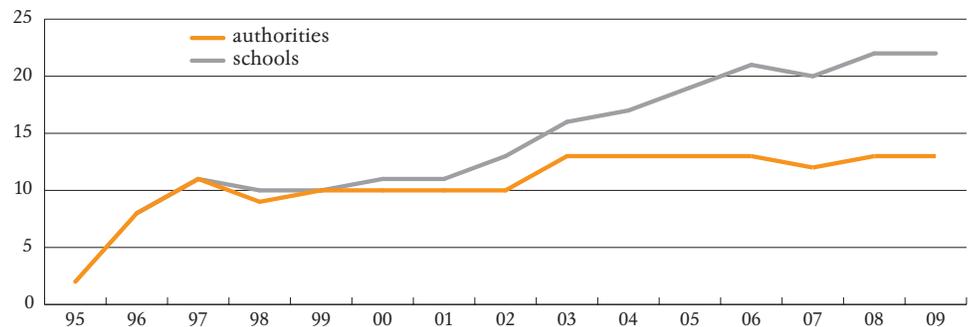
Source: Alberta Education.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

The growth in enrolment is reflected in the number of charter school authorities and schools in Alberta, growing from three at the outset to 13, the largest number of charter school authorities in operation at any given time. The number of authorities has remained relatively constant since 1997 (Figure 3). The number of campuses, however, has increased. This is due to expansion from the largest charter schools such as Foundations for the Future, which currently operates on seven campuses, and the Calgary Girls’ School, Calgary Arts Academy and Almadina Language Charter Academy, which have two campuses each. Additional facility space has allowed charter schools to expand their student intake.

Figure 3

Charter Authorities and Schools in Alberta



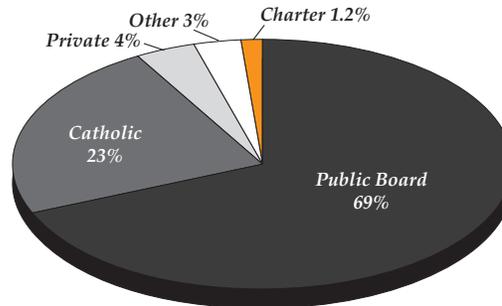
Source: Alberta Education.

Demand for charter schools has not, however, kept pace with their growth rate. Because charter schools have enrolment caps they are only permitted to accept a certain number of students. The number for each school is determined according to its charter agreement and facility size. According to the enrolment caps set for each charter, the total number of students able to attend charter schools in 2006 was 7,726. That number does not take into account regional variations, which impact demand and accessibility. For example, the enrolment cap for Centre for Personal and Academic Excellence (CAPE) in Medicine Hat permits up to 218 students, but in the 2008/2009 school year, they only enrolled 133 students. As CAPE is the only charter school in Medicine Hat, this indicates that space exceeds demand for this school. By contrast, the enrolment cap for Foundations for the Future Charter Academy in Calgary is 2,925. They not only have all of those spaces filled, but also have a waiting list of approximately 4,500 students, indicating that location and philosophy may significantly impact the demand for charter school programs. Charter schools may apply to the Minister of Education for a change in their enrolment caps. In

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

Figure 4

Student School Selection in Alberta 2008/2009



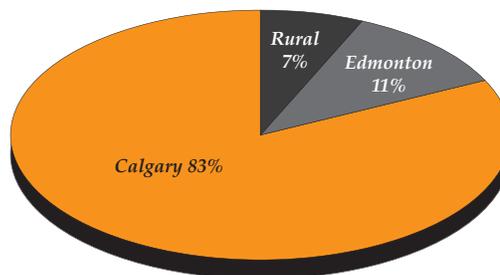
Source: Alberta Education.

recent years, however, all expansion requests have been denied, primarily citing facilities access as the reason.

Across the province, charter school students represent 1.2% of the total student population. This can be compared with 69% of students in public boards, 23% in the Catholic separate boards, 4% in private schools and 3% in other schools including Francophone and federal schools (Figure 4). Charter school students are far from homogenous, however, and come from all over the province. Calgary has the highest number of charter schools as well as the greatest proportion of charter school students. There are six charter schools in Calgary compared to three in Edmonton and four in rural, or semi-rural, areas. Additionally, the charter schools in Calgary are the largest in the province. The smallest charter school in Calgary is larger than any other charter school in the province and, as a whole, Calgary charter schools enroll 83% of all charter students. Edmonton charter schools are a distant second and enroll 11% of charter students and 7% of charter students attend rural, or semi-rural, schools (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Charter School Enrolment By Location

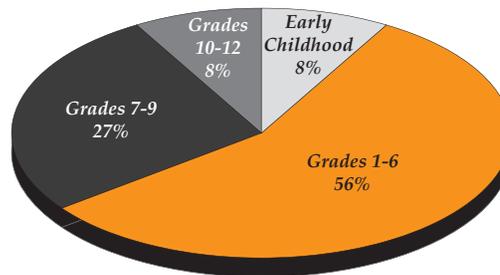


Source: Alberta Education.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

Figure 6

Charter School Population Breakdown 2008/2009



Source: Alberta Education.

The primary population served by charter schools is students in grades 1-6. This grade range represents 56% of charter school students. The next largest population of students is those in grades 7-9, who comprise 27% of enrolment. Students in early childhood and grades 10-12 both represent 8% of the total student population (Figure 6). This is representative of the programs offered by charter schools. Of the 13 school authorities, only three offer high school programs. The majority of charter schools cease offering programs after grade 9, two after grade 6 and two schools begin programming in grade 4. Some charter schools have approval to offer grades beyond what they currently offer. For example, Aurora, Mother Earth's and New Horizons are all approved to offer K-12 but currently only offer K-9, while the Calgary Girls' School is approved for grades 1-9 but only has facility space to offer grades 4-9. The majority of charter schools are offering the full range of programs for which they are approved.

Research into the socio-economic status (SES) of charter school students reveals that, generally, charter school students live in neighbourhoods with similar SES characteristics to those in comparable alternative schools and enroll approximately the same number of students for whom English is a second language (ESL). This picture changes somewhat, however, when charter students are

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

Figure 7 **Comparison of Socio-Economic Status Factors**

Variable	Charter School	Comparable Alternative School	Local Board	Province	Charter as % of Alternative
Average family income	\$85,858	\$83,156	\$79,349	\$71,854	103%
Percent with degree	21.1%	21.3%	19.8%	14.8%	99%
Percent ESL	13.9%	13.3%	19.0%	15.7%	105%

Source: Source: Charter School Impact Study 2006

compared with all students in Alberta. By this comparison it becomes clear that charter school students, and those in public alternative schools, come from somewhat higher SES backgrounds and enroll a smaller number of ESL students.

This indicates that charter schools appear to cater to families with a slightly higher than average socio-economic status, but are comparable to families who choose alternative programming within the regular school system.

Charter school students compete academically with all other students. They are required to take Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) in grades 3, 6, 9 and Provincial Diploma Examinations (PDE) in grade 12. Statistically, charter school students perform to an equivalent level or better than students in other schools. There is a great deal of diversity, however, in charter school performance. Charter schools that cater to ESL, or at-risk, students perform somewhat worse compared to other charter schools, whereas gifted students perform somewhat better. Because charter schools have programs designed to cater to certain kinds of students, there has been some question of how they can be adequately compared to students in the regular system. In an effort to resolve this difficulty, the Charter School Impact Study (CSIS) was conducted to see how students in charter schools compared to control students and schools.

Control students were those who scored identically to charter students in grade 3 Provincial Achievement Tests. Control schools were public or separate schools in the same district with the same, or very close, scores on grade 3 PATs to the charter school. The purpose of this test was to see how charter students compared to academically equivalent achievers in different schools in order to assess the “school factor.” Their results found that in Language Arts, charter school students obtained significantly better results on their grade 6 provincial achievement tests than did

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

control students, and they outperformed students in control schools by an even larger degree (Alberta Education 2006). There were no significant differences between charter school students and control students in Mathematics. The control student process was also applied to grade 9 PATs. They found that charter school students did significantly better than their control group in both Language Arts and Mathematics. Based on these findings, CSIS concluded, “over a six-year period, these charter schools added significantly more value to their entering Grade 3 students than did the schools into which the control students enrolled” (Alberta Education 2006: 50).

One of the common characteristics of charter school students, parents and teachers is their high levels of satisfaction with the school. Teachers in charter schools work long hours, with fewer resources, and often make less than their public board colleagues. Despite these challenges, they report strong levels of satisfaction from working in a supportive environment with like-minded peers (Bosetti et al. 2000; Alberta Education 2006). When asked about the challenges of teaching at a charter school, most teachers indicate inadequate facilities, transportation issues, and the uncertainty of the school’s future. Parents and students are also highly satisfied with charter schools. Parents are consistently happy with the quality of teaching and the academic challenge their children receive. They especially like that the teaching philosophy is prevalent throughout the school and not restricted to certain teachers or subject areas. Students indicate they have more self-confidence and equivalent, or higher, academic performance (Bosetti 2001). Challenges indicated by parents and students include school facilities, transportation issues and not being involved in their own community.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

6. CHARTER SCHOOL CHALLENGES

Charter schools experience a number of challenges, ranging from the relatively minor, such as balancing an appropriate level of parental involvement in the education process, to large issues that could threaten the continuity of charter schools. Highlighted below are the challenges that charter school stakeholders have identified as being major impediments to achieving their full potential:

Charter schools are not well understood. Since inception, charter schools have struggled to be understood by the broader community. Many people believe that charter schools are private, elite institutions that charge tuition and cater only to the gifted. Testing levels of understanding, the Charter School Impact Study asked the public what the purpose and value of charter schools was after 10 years of experience. They found that about 33% of respondents indicated they know what charter schools are, but at least half of those respondents had an incorrect impression of charter schools, or did not provide an answer. Based on these results, they inferred, “less than 15% of respondents actually have a reasonable idea of what charter schools are” (Alberta Education 2006: 24). This lack of awareness perpetuates misunderstandings and erodes public support and therefore is a challenge for charter schools because it limits their ability to influence government policy.

Charter renewal process. The charter renewal process is a challenge for two reasons. First, it occupies enormous resources, time and effort from teachers and administrators, time taken away from direct education provision. Second, the charter renewal process builds instability into the institutions. Schools cannot guarantee their charter will be renewed, which not only restricts their ability to access long-term financial support, but also creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and impermanence for parents, teachers, students and administrators.

School facilities. Due to the impermanent status of charter schools, there are restrictions on what facility options are available. Charter schools do not have access to municipal reserve lands, because they do not meet the definition of a school authority under the *Municipal Government Act*, nor are they able to secure the long-term loans required to build a new school.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

As such, charters are only able to rent or lease school facilities. Initially, no assistance was provided to meet this expense and charter schools devoted 10 to 15% of their operating budget to facilities, a cost not born by public school boards whose facilities are paid for by the government (Bosetti 2001). In an effort to address this discrepancy, the government now provides money to charter schools so they can afford to lease facilities. Most commonly, charter school boards lease facilities from the public or separate school districts that are outdated or underserved. These facilities are often older and run down, usually requiring more maintenance work, may not be ideally located for the charter school population and may not augment the philosophy of the school or match the demographics of the student population.

Legislation framework. Legislation has not kept pace with the growth of charter schools and fails to account for their role in the education system. The result is a legislative framework that still regards charter schools as an education experiment. This is compounded by the unclear position of charter schools within the education system. Charter schools are easily overlooked because they are part of the public system, but unless named specifically, they are not included in general provisions given to public school boards. Additionally, the legislation regulating access to reserve lands, enrolment caps, and accountability measures place restrictions on the growth and success of charter schools.

Relationship with school boards. Some local school boards, as well as the Alberta School Boards Association, do not support the idea of charter schools (ASBA 2009). This has resulted in a lack of communication between school authorities and a perception of rivalry over students and funding. This negative relationship impacts the opportunities for teachers, administrators and board members to share innovative education strategies and build constructive working relationships, one of the key mandates for charter schools.

Relationship with Alberta Teacher's Association. Charter school teachers must be certificated teachers, but they are not permitted to be full members of the Alberta Teacher's Association. This has the advantage, however, of giving charter schools greater flexibility in the hiring and management of their teaching staff. They can hire, and retain, teachers whose philosophy most closely accords with the school's. It has the disadvantage, though, of isolating charter teachers from their colleagues and peers, making it difficult to collaborate and communicate within their professional community. Despite an official stance of non-support for charter schools, the ATA passed resolution 128/97 providing charter teachers with the opportunity for the ATA to bargain on their behalf if requested (ATA 1997).

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

Continued opposition to the idea of charter schools. Despite having charter schools in Alberta for almost 15 years, there is still opposition to the idea of charters. Opponents of charter schools argue:

- ▶ Charter schools create a two-tiered education system.
- ▶ Charter schools encourage social fragmentation and lead to balkanization of society.
- ▶ Charter schools serve niche markets and create programs not effective for the whole. Therefore they do not encourage system-wide reform and innovation.
- ▶ Charter schools spend more on administration because they do not have efficiencies of scale.
- ▶ The concerns of most parents can be addressed by the public system.
- ▶ Marketing, rather than educational improvement, becomes the central focus.
- ▶ Charter schools exclude students with special needs.
- ▶ There are hidden impediments to real choice, such as transportation costs.
- ▶ Charter schools represent a loss of community through the deterioration of the neighbourhood school.
- ▶ Charter schools are not truly public because their boards are not elected from the general populace.

All of these points must be carefully considered as they raise significant concerns for the provision of education. They are not, however, definitive or beyond debate. For example, critics argue that charter schools create a two-tiered education system benefitting the wealthy and educated. This is because of hidden costs of charter schools such as transportation costs and parent education and research skills required to find and select charter schools. Charter school proponents counter that charter schools do not charge tuition and are open to all students. They further note that: 1) the SES of charter students is equivalent to students in alternative programs offered by public boards; and 2) some charter schools cater specifically to students *underserved* by public boards. In Alberta, these include the ESL students in Almadina Language Charter Academy, the high-risk youth in Boyle Street Education Centre, and academically capable underachievers in CAPE.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools:
Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter
Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools
Today
- ▶ Charter School
Challenges
- ▶ Charter School
Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter
Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter
Schools in Alberta

All of these criticisms raise important issues about charter schools and for every point there are arguments on both sides. Continued criticism constitutes a challenge for charter schools because it undermines government and public support. Controversy is also an opportunity, however, because it provides a forum for discussion about how the provision of education in Alberta can be improved and the role of charter schools in that improvement.

The challenges of legislation, the charter renewal process and the relationship with education colleagues have been identified as the most pressing. There are a number of smaller difficulties that impede progress but are not of the same scope. These include transportation issues for students and parents, inadequate resources in the classrooms, fewer opportunities for students to participate in sports and music programs, staff retention, and so on. These difficulties, although significant, are of an operational nature rather than a functional nature.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools:
Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter
Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools
Today
- ▶ Charter School
Challenges
- ▶ Charter School
Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter
Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter
Schools in Alberta

7. CHARTER SCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to challenges, there are a number of opportunities for charter schools. These opportunities range from the mundane to the visionary. As an illustration, one of the opportunities for charter schools is to continue serving their students well. This may not seem like an opportunity *per se*, but every charter school student who achieves academic success validates the role of charter schools. Every time charter school students succeed in provincial achievement assessments, it demonstrates the need for innovative programming. In many ways, charter schools have validated themselves through their success and one of their opportunities for the future is to continue succeeding.

Similarly, charter schools have an opportunity to continue providing an alternative. It is difficult to measure the current impact of charter schools considering their numbers, and size, are relatively small. Studies have found that charter schools have helped to entrench the value of choice in public education, either through alternative programming or alternative school authorities (Bosetti et al. 2000). This impact has been felt most in urban centres where charter schools are more concentrated, and has not affected rural areas to the same degree. Further, researchers remark that charter schools have not really been allowed to impact education to full effect because of their size and their relationship with other education colleagues (Alberta Education 2006). This is the opportunity: to necessitate responsiveness and innovation in the public system and to provide a choice for those who believe they are not served well in the regular system.

More important than what charter schools have already brought to the education system is what they have the potential to bring. Due to the small size of charter school boards, and their commitment to innovation in education, they have the potential to become centres for educational research and development. Through partnerships with universities and research centres, charter schools can become leaders in education. They can experiment with, and test, educational theory in order to find combinations with the best possible results. These results can then be shared and implemented throughout the educational community with the common goal of giving Alberta students the best possible education. As a result of these educational developments, charter school teachers and administrators would be at the forefront of education innovation

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

SUMMARY OF CHARTER SCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES

Opportunities charter schools currently provide:

- ▶ Provide a choice to parents, teachers and students
- ▶ Implement innovative educational strategies
- ▶ Provide consistent education philosophy
- ▶ Provide competition to traditional school boards
- ▶ Incorporate technology actively into education

Opportunities for charter schools in the future:

- ▶ To become centres of educational research and development
- ▶ To broaden the educational community
- ▶ To become experts in innovative education

and become experts at its implementation. This vision for charter schools accords with the policy-makers' intentions for charter schools, they believed "the successful programs and practices developed at charter schools would eventually be adopted by other public schools to benefit all children" (Bosetti et al. 2000, 160). In order for this to be a reality, however, educational research must be funded separately. It is impractical to expect charter schools to conduct innovative educational research without financial support that goes beyond the base allocation for education.

Developing alongside the vision of charter schools as leaders in educational research is the opportunity for charter schools to create a broader educational community. By their nature, charter schools are in a better position to initiate and build relationships with the wider community than other school systems. They have the flexibility and the incentive to seek expertise outside of the traditional educational community and therefore can expand the role of "educator" to artists, musicians, leading scientists, local leaders, and many more. By opening up the doors of the classrooms, charter schools have the opportunity to influence the role of education in society and to expand the education community far beyond its current borders, potentially both widening and deepening education in Alberta.

One of the simplest opportunities for charter schools is to grow, for there to be more charter schools, in more regions, stimulating innovation

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

throughout the province. There is, however, also a caution with this opportunity. Much of the strength of charter schools derives from their small size. This allows them to be responsive and innovative in how they approach education, hire staff and respond to student concerns. If charter schools become too large, there is a risk that they will lose this niche role in the education market. Edward Fiske notes, “for charters to fulfill their function as a spur to innovation, it is thus probably best that they not become the norm. When charter schools are limited in number, they can be given the flexibility to be innovative, to offer alternative educational environments, and to take risks” (2001: 65). There is a need to find the balance between enough growth to truly encourage innovation throughout the province, but not so much that the incentive to innovate is lost.

These are some of the opportunities that exist for charter schools as a conglomerate. They do not include those available to individual charter schools. Individual schools have the potential to impact their communities, both geographic and intellectual, by providing technologically advanced, connected and informed education that speaks to their specific education strategy. Whether finding new ways to engage and retain youth in rural communities, or teaching students about the leading edge of scientific experimentation, the possibilities are limitless.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

8. QUESTIONS CHARTER SCHOOLS RAISE

The charter school debate raises many questions that warrant further investigation. Some of these questions speak to the changing nature of a globalized world. For example, both sides of the charter school debate raise the issue of community. Opponents argue that charter schools threaten communities because children are taken out of their local school, if one exists, thereby loosening the ties that bind a neighbourhood together. Proponents meanwhile argue that charter schools create community; groups of like-minded parents, teachers, administrators and volunteers come together with a common purpose and set of values concerning education. These are two different understandings of community, as a geographical or an intellectual, emotive construct. The question that charter schools raise is: which understanding of community has more resonance in the 21st Century? And what impact does this understanding of community have for the future of education?

Other questions are more practical and specific in nature, asking, in essence, where have we come from, and where should we go from here. Some examples of these questions include:

- ▶ What has been the impact of charter schools in Alberta?
- ▶ What is the ideal size of charter schools, both individually and collectively?
- ▶ What relationship ought to exist between charter public school boards and regular public school boards?
- ▶ What is the future of charter schools in Alberta?
- ▶ What are the implications of leveling and competition in education provision?
- ▶ How do unions affect the quality of education provision?
- ▶ What should other provinces learn from Alberta's charter experience?

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools:
Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter
Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools
Today
- ▶ Charter School
Challenges
- ▶ Charter School
Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter
Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter
Schools in Alberta

These are the questions that must be engaged with by policy-makers, the broad education sector and the charter school community, as they will help to shape the future of education in Alberta and Canada. Some work has been done on these questions, particularly around the question of how charter schools have impacted education. The results have not been conclusive, however, as the size of charter schools in Alberta has prevented proper assessment. Broader questions – questions that challenge the status quo – have not been engaged with in a meaningful way.

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

9. CONCLUSION

The central questions that should guide discussions about charter schools are: What has to be done to ensure that the Canadian education system is second to none? How can charter schools help us to fulfill this goal? There are no definitive answers to these questions. One thing that is clear is that, in an increasingly globalized and competitive world, it is imperative that Canadian education adequately equips and prepares students to compete in the global market. Based on the evidence so far, there is a possibility that charter schools can help achieve that goal. Charter schools were introduced in Alberta in order to provide choice and innovation in public education provision. This goal has been accomplished. Charter schools are a viable *public* alternative for parents, students and teachers. They have been creative in their programming and have encouraged other school boards to be innovative and to develop alternative programs (Alberta Education 2006). For these accomplishments alone, charter schools have proven their worth.

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. This means changing legislation in two important ways: 1) giving charter schools permanent status; and 2) clarifying charter schools' position in the education system. Giving charter schools permanent status will enable them to access the funding and facilities they need to fulfill their mandates and relieve some of the administrative burden of the charter renewal process. There is a need, however, to continue to manage charter schools with respect to growth, and to hold them to high levels of accountability. If charter schools become too prevalent, or if the criteria for demonstrable innovation and success are not ensured, charter schools may cease to fulfill their mandate.

Clarifying charter schools' position in the education system will prevent them from falling through loopholes that restrict their access to education resources and municipal reserve lands; it will also alter their relationship with other school authorities. For charter schools to succeed, increased opportunities and incentives for collaboration, sharing and professional

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools:
Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter
Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools
Today
- ▶ Charter School
Challenges
- ▶ Charter School
Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter
Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter
Schools in Alberta

development between charter school educators and the rest of the education system need to be established. The absence of dialogue and communication throughout the professional community limits the extent to which research and innovation can permeate the education system. The legislation around charter schools needs to be adjusted to accommodate them as permanent fixtures with a mandate to provide innovation in education. Without changes to legislation and increased communication in the education community, asking charter schools to accomplish their full potential is the equivalent of clipping a bird's wings and then asking it to fly. ■

- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

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- ▶ Executive Summary
 - ▶ Introduction
 - ▶ Methodology
 - ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
 - ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
 - ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
 - ▶ Charter School Challenges
 - ▶ Charter School Opportunities
 - ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
 - ▶ Conclusion
 - ▶ Bibliography
 - ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta
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- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools: Technical Information
- ▶ History of Charter Schools in Alberta
- ▶ Alberta Charter Schools Today
- ▶ Charter School Challenges
- ▶ Charter School Opportunities
- ▶ Questions Charter Schools Raise
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Appendix A: Charter Schools in Alberta

APPENDIX A: CHARTER SCHOOLS IN ALBERTA

School & Location	Grades	Number of Students 08/09	Mission
Almadina Language Charter Academy <i>Calgary</i>	K - 9	706	Ensures that our students whose second or third language at home is English reach their full potential as they prepare to meet the challenges of high school, lifelong learning, and citizenship in a dynamic, democratic knowledge-based society that respects each child's special gifts and the commitment to promote diversity in shared values.
Aurora Charter School <i>Edmonton</i>	K - 9	404	To provide an orderly and structured environment, with properly sequenced teacher-directed instruction and strong home / school partnerships, where average children can excel in an academically oriented program.
Boyle Street Education Centre <i>Edmonton</i>	Ages 14-19	119	To promote the success of students who are high-risk youth or who have been out of school, in their goals of education, including the acquisition of social and employability skills, so they may be responsible, caring and contributing members of society; and to encourage the participation in and commitment to education process by parents and caregivers, students and the community.
Calgary Arts Academy <i>Calgary</i>	K - 9	405	An innovative school that engages children through arts immersion to become confident learners and spirited citizens.
Calgary Girls' School <i>Calgary</i>	4 - 9	603	To provide an innovative public charter school program for girls, emphasizing personal best in achievement, leadership, collaboration, and service within a dedicated all-girls environment.
Calgary Science School <i>Calgary</i>	4 - 9	599	To improve student learning by providing a special focus on science and mathematics in an environment where learners strive to become ethical leaders who find motivation and excitement in discovering and forging connections within and among sciences, mathematics, the arts and the humanities.
Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence <i>Medicine Hat</i>	K - 8	133	To foster academic and personal skills in students who are intellectually capable but may be underachieving so that they may pursue and achieve personal and academic excellence and become lifelong learners and contribute to human improvement.
Foundations for the Future Charter Academy <i>Calgary</i>	K - 12	2,562	To provide a safe and caring environment where academic excellence, character development, parental involvement and staff leadership are valued and fostered.
Mother Earth's Children's Charter School <i>Wabamun</i>	K - 8	113	To wholistically nurture, guide and challenge each child's spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional self through traditional indigenous teachings.
New Horizons Charter School <i>Sherwood Park</i>	K - 9	176	To enable gifted students to strive for excellence in an environment that is low-anxiety, positive, and supportive of the individual.
Suzuki Charter School <i>Edmonton</i>	K - 6	233	To create, develop and maintain continuity and growth over time in an enriched learning environment utilizing the Suzuki philosophy and method thereby promoting the academic and musical/artistic talents of each individual student.
Valhalla Community School <i>Valhalla</i>	K - 6	53	That students acquire the attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary for success in a rapidly changing economy; and that students develop strong ethical and civic standards, a solid commitment to their families, neighbourhood, province, country and global community.
Westmount Charter School <i>Calgary</i>	K - 12	1,055	To meet the learning needs of gifted students and promote their social-emotional development in a congregated setting.

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