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

Effective innovation in education systems depends on high quality research. Innovation in the Alberta ECS—Grade 12 system is supported in several ways:

- Research carried out by faculties of education at Alberta universities and colleges;
- Research projects in schools funded through the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI);
- Applied research carried out by stakeholder organizations (such as the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta Teachers’ Association; the College of Alberta School Superintendents); and
- Research carried out by charter schools.

Research in education serves a number of purposes, including:

- Gathering evidence from research at the classroom, school and school board level to inform a variety of management and governance decisions;
- Providing focus for educational change and policy development related to student engagement and learning;
- Providing opportunities to conduct applied research to enhance teacher preparation, teacher practice and student learning outcomes;
- Encouraging and supporting the development of change leaders who are willing and able to champion innovation in education;
- Allowing teachers to participate in applied research and understand its importance in improving student learning, and
- Engaging students in research initiatives to ensure that improvement activities are focused on ensuring the system is student-centred.

In Alberta, charter schools play an important role in supporting research and innovation in education. They were established by the Government of Alberta in 1994 as part of a larger initiative to provide choice and to foster innovation in the education system. One of the original purposes of creating charter schools was not only to support and encourage educational innovation, but also to disseminate the results of research conducted in charter schools more broadly across the Alberta education system.

Fifteen years after the first charter schools opened, we are asking Albertans to help us develop a vision for the future of charter schools. In particular, we are interested in finding out what interested members of the public think about a number of ideas that have been proposed for the future role and purpose of charter schools.

Action on Research and Innovation: January 2011
The Future of Charter Schools in Alberta
We encourage you to complete the entire survey by checking/selecting appropriate options for each of the questions. In addition to the Background Information paper posted, you will find further background information preceding each section of the survey describing the current status of charter schools in Alberta and some possible future directions. Please take the time to read this information in order to help inform your answers.

Additional questions and comment sections are included for further input and to allow you to provide the rationale for your perspective. In addition, there is space provided at the end of the survey to comment on any other key areas related to the future direction of charter schools in Alberta, that are not covered in this survey and that you wish to bring to the attention of Alberta Education.

Thank you in advance for your response.

Please submit your completed survey online by **February 18, 2011**.

Although online submissions are preferred, if you are not able to complete the survey online please download and complete a hard copy of the survey. Written responses are also welcome.

Please send hard copy responses to the survey or written submissions by mail or fax to:

David Woloshyn  
Acting Director, Zone 5 Services Branch  
Alberta Education  
9th Floor, 44 Capital Boulevard  
10044-108 Street  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T5J 5E6  

FAX: 780-422-9682
To begin with, we have a few demographic questions to help us better understand our participants.

Please Tell Us About Yourself:

Any information gathered through this survey document will only be reported in ways that will not identify you.

I live:

☐ In Edmonton

☐ In Calgary

☐ In a smaller city, town, village or rural area of Alberta

☐ I do not live in Alberta

Please select **ALL** that apply to you.

I am:

**Student:**

☐ A current or former student of an Alberta Charter School

☐ A student who has never attended an Alberta Charter School

**Parent:**

☐ A parent** of a child who is currently attending or has formerly attended an Alberta Charter School

☐ A parent** of a child who is currently attending or has formerly attended an Alberta Early Education Services (ECS) to grade 12 program (excluding an Alberta Charter School)

☐ A parent** of a pre-school child

**Parent includes guardian and /or primary caregiver for a child.

**School Authority Staff (teacher, administrator or support staff):**

☐ A current or former staff member of an Alberta Charter School

☐ A current or former Alberta school system (excluding an Alberta Charter School) staff member
Board Member:

☐ A current or former Alberta Charter School board member
☐ A current or former Alberta school board trustee

I am providing a response that represents the views of an educational stakeholder organization or a school authority:

☐ Alberta Catholic School Trustees’ Association
☐ Alberta School Boards Association
☐ Alberta School Councils’ Association
☐ Alberta Teachers’ Association
☐ Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta
☐ Association of School Business Officials of Alberta
☐ College of Alberta School Superintendents
☐ Public School Boards’ of Alberta Association
☐ The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools
☐ Deans of Alberta Universities
☐ A school jurisdiction
☐ A charter school

Other:

☐ A concerned citizen/an interested member of the public
☐ A member of the business community
☐ A staff member of a post-secondary institution
☐ A community agency/not for profit organization

Please specify:

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Action on Research and Innovation:  January 2011
The Future of Charter Schools in Alberta
PRIMARY PURPOSE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

Current Purpose of Alberta Charter Schools

The current purpose of Alberta charter schools is to improve student learning by providing a different educational environment beyond the services provided by the existing school board. The charter boards that operate the schools have the flexibility and considerable autonomy to implement innovative or enhanced educational services that will broaden the range of educational opportunities to enhance student learning by improving students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes. Charter schools specialize in a particular educational service or approach in order to address the needs of a particular group of students. Charter schools may complement or add to existing local programs where there are a sufficient number of students who could benefit from the program. This means that parents and students have increased opportunities to choose an education that best serves student needs.

The following is a list of the current Alberta Charter Schools and a description of their program focus:

- Almadina Language Charter Academy - English as a Second Language
- Aurora Charter School Ltd. - Traditional Education Program
- Boyle Street Education Centre - Students at Risk
- Calgary Arts Academy and Research Centre - Arts Immersion
- Calgary Girls’ School Academy - Leadership in Young Girls
- Calgary Science School - Inquiry-based Learning Supported by Technology and Outdoor Education
- Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence Institute - Academic and Personal Excellence (Gifted underachievers)
- Foundations for the Future Charter Academy - Academic Excellence and Character Development
- Mother Earth’s Children’s Charter School - Traditional Indigenous Methodology
- New Horizons Charter School Society - Gifted Education
- Suzuki Charter School Society - Academics Enriched with Music
- Valhalla Community School - Rural Leadership with Direct Instruction and Second Language
- Westmount Charter School Academy - Gifted and Talented

Possible Direction for the Purpose of the Future of Charter Schools in Alberta – Research and Innovation

In the future, charter schools of Alberta could serve as provincial innovative education research centres. This vision for charter schools of the future would require engagement in significant education research. Alberta’s future charter schools, with an emphasis on exploring innovation, would give researchers a unique opportunity to conduct a thorough research program in a relatively controlled setting.
Leading-edge research is the foundation that education uses to create sound policy and to inform solid decision-making. It is research that tackles some of the big challenges in education and reaches beyond or extends research undertaken in Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI - http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi.aspx) projects or other research initiatives among school authorities. Education research that meets the rigors of university-based, peer review criteria underpins system reform and is used to create the best possible learning environments for young people.

1. To what extent do you agree that one of the key purposes of future charter schools in Alberta should be to serve as centres of innovation?

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2. To what extent do you agree that one of the key purposes of future charter schools in Alberta should be to serve as centres for educational research?

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Possible Direction for Future of Charter Schools in Alberta - Relationship with Post Secondary Institutions

Charter schools could build on the traditional relationship schools have had with post-secondary research institutions as a source of ideas and to establish or enhance new relationships with post-secondary educators who have traditionally had little direct involvement with schools. University faculties of medicine, nursing, social work, engineering, fine arts, or sciences; polytechnic departments of manufacturing and automation, hospitality and tourism; or college faculties of science and technology, international education and languages might inform different approaches to education and offer valuable insights.

3. To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should be required to establish research partnerships with post-secondary institutions?

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Possible Direction for Future of Charter Schools in Alberta - Share Effective Practices

Charter schools could also have an increased responsibility for spreading effective education practices. Publication of research about effective practices would go part of the way, but they could go further. In the new vision for charter schools, charter school teachers...
and administrators could play a more significant role in the professional development of others. They could serve as mentors to teachers and administrators in other schools. Charter schools could offer others the opportunity for extended visits of observation or practice. The next generation of charter schools would be an in-demand resource for Alberta’s educators who want to improve their professional practice.

4. To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should be resource centres to enhance teacher professional development?

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Possible Direction for Future of Charter Schools in Alberta – Funding to Support Research

Charter operators would continue to operate with administrative and operational funding at rates similar to school jurisdictions, but could receive funding to cover the costs of additional expectations or be given the flexibility to secure alternate funding sources. Research funding would be provided through the charter operator, to individual researchers or to a research consortium. The amount would be determined on a case-by-case basis as necessary to achieve the charter research aims.

5. To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should secure additional funding through alternate funding options such as grants, donations, or private sector sponsorship to conduct research and disseminate results?

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6. What barriers might exist that would prevent charter schools from becoming centres of innovation and research?

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7. Please provide any other comments or ideas on future charter schools in Alberta becoming centres for innovation and research.

GOVERNANCE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

Current Governance of Alberta Charter Schools

A charter school is operated by a society or company in accordance with section 31(1) of the School Act.

Applicants to establish a charter school may include parents, teachers and/or community members. Applicants must become incorporated as a society or registered as a company according to the School Act (Section 31(1)). In order to proceed with an application for charter status, the following steps must be followed:

- The local school board and charter organization must make every attempt to arrive at an agreement for the establishment of an alternative program under Section 21 of the School Act.

- The local school board has 60 school days to reject the request for an alternative program. The local school board must inform the charter organizers, in writing, stating the reasons for rejection if the application is not approved.

- If the local school board rejects the request for an alternative program, the charter organizers have 30 school days to submit a charter school application directly to the Minister. The Minister then has 60 days to decide whether to approve the charter as submitted, approve it with conditions, or reject it stating the reasons for doing so.

Possible Direction of Future of Charter Schools in Alberta - Governance

Charter schools could be operated by school jurisdictions, post-secondary institutions or other public or private organizations.
8. To what extent do you believe that future charter schools in Alberta should be operated by:

a) Charter board made up of parents of students attending the charter school

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b) Public, separate or francophone school authorities

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c) Post secondary institutions

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d) Non-profit societies, companies or foundations

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e) Public Institutions

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f) Private Sector Businesses

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g) A partnership or coalition of any of the above a) to f)

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If you agree with g), specify which partners should be included when establishing a partnership/coalition ____________________________
Current Board Structure of Alberta Charter Schools

Charter schools are governed by the board of directors of the society of company named in the charter. This governing body is called the charter board. In accordance with the provisions of the Societies Act (http://www.qp.alberta.ca/570.cfm?frm_isbn=0779725298&search_by=link) or the Companies Act (http://www.qp.alberta.ca/574.cfm?page=c21.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncln=9780779735037), the charter board must have bylaws and procedures for governance of the board as well as for governance of the charter school. Charter schools are non-profit schools and they shall be operated by non-profit societies or companies.

Possible Direction for Future of Charter Schools in Alberta - Board Structure

Charter boards could include mandated representation from the charter school’s parent body, a post – secondary institution, a local school jurisdiction and any other pertinent partner.

9. Please rank examples of board structures that future charter schools in Alberta could have, in order of your preference from 1 - 6 with 1 being most preferred and 6 least preferred:
   a) An elected board of directors representing parents of students attending the charter school.___________
   b) A board selected according to the charter school’s own bylaws. ___________
   c) A board with mandated representation from a wide variety of community stakeholders. ___________
   d) A board with at least one representative from a post-secondary institution. ___________
   e) A board with at least one representative from a local school jurisdiction or Francophone Regional Authority. ___________
   f) Governance by a regional board (a regional board is a board that may operate more than one charter school). ___________

10. Please provide any other comments or ideas about the board structure of future charter schools in Alberta.

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ESTABLISHMENT OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

Current Processes for Establishing an Alberta Charter School

At school opening, the minimum student enrolment is set at 100 students, or another number that, in the opinion of the Minister, is high enough to ensure that the school is financially and educationally viable. A charter board may operate in more than one location only if a single school building cannot accommodate the expected number of students identified in the charter. Alberta Education currently places an enrolment cap on each charter school, and, the total number of charter schools in Alberta is capped at 15.

The initial term of a charter is five years beginning on the first day on which the charter school opens. A charter school operates for its term unless the charter is repealed or the operation of the charter school is terminated. A charter board may apply to the Minister for a renewal of the charter no later than December 1 of the final year of its term. The Minister conducts at least one evaluation of a charter school within its current term and the charter may be renewed for a term of five years or less. The Minister shall not renew a charter if the charter school is not meeting the term of its charter and has not demonstrated clear evidence of success, is not operating in compliance with policies of the Minister or applicable laws, is not fiscally viable and responsible, and does not have a successful school program.

Possible Direction for the Future of Charter Schools in Alberta - Processes for Establishing

There should be a limit on the number of charter schools to ensure a focused purpose on research. The term of each charter need not be fixed at five years, but instead could be commensurate with the education research that the charter applicants propose. There could be additional options to renew a school’s charter for a new term if the school has:

a) provided professional development opportunities related to its innovative approach to the rest of Alberta’s education community,
b) met or exceeded appropriate targets as set out in a student outcomes accountability framework,
c) achieved student achievement results as good or better than provincial results as a whole, measured in a value-added manner,
d) earned parental satisfaction results better than those of the province as a whole, and at least as good as results for schools within public and/or separate boards offering alternative programs and/or catering to the same defined populations,
e) demonstrated a need for further research into its innovation, and f) shared with the education community their research, which evaluates the success of the innovation and identifies reasons for that success with government and educators.
11. To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should be granted a charter based on their approved research design?

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12. To what extent do you agree that the extension of the term of future charter schools in Alberta should be dependent on specific criteria such as student success, a positive evaluation by government or independent body and the demonstrated need for further research?

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13. To what extent do you agree that there should be a cap on the number of students that each future charter school in Alberta can enroll, based on its innovation and research design?

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14. To what extent do you agree that there should be a provision for some charter schools to be granted permanence (i.e. not be required to renew the term of their charter)?

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15. Please provide any other comments or ideas on how future charter schools in Alberta should be established.

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TEACHERS IN CHARter SCHOOLS

Current Qualification for Teachers in Alberta Charter Schools

All teachers offering instruction in current charter schools must hold a certificate of qualification. If the charter board employs its own teachers, the teachers cannot be active members of the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA), as the Teaching Profession Act applies only to school boards.

16. To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should have the flexibility to employ non-certificated teachers in some specialty areas such as fine arts, career and technology studies, or athletics?

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17. To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should have the flexibility to enter into various teacher contractual obligations (e.g., merit pay, longer school days or years, support for additional responsibilities, etc.)?

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18. Please provide any other comments or ideas on the qualifications of teachers for future charter schools in Alberta.

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ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS

Current Accountability for Alberta Charter Schools

Each charter board is accountable for the operation and performance of its charter school. A board is responsible for ensuring that the charter school complies with charter board procedures and the terms of the charter, as well as provincial legislation, regulation and policies. A charter board is accountable to its students, parents, community and to the Minister. The charter board must make publicly available annual reports that describe how...
well students are accomplishing their educational goals, certain documents and reports under section 75 of the School Act (http://www.qp.alberta.ca/574.cfm?page=s03.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncln=9780779755073), and any other information requested by the Minister.

A charter board promises to improve student learning beyond the services provided by the existing local school board. In addition, charter boards are accountable for demonstrating that implementation of the charter goals has resulted in improved student learning outcomes and growth.

19. To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should have an increased responsibility to widely disseminate their research results?

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20. To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should have an accountability to ensure that research is subject to peer review?

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21. To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should have an accountability to submit their research for academic publication?

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22. To what extent do you agree that future charter schools in Alberta should have a more rigorous accountability for improved student achievement than school jurisdictions?

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23. Please provide any other comments or other ideas on the accountability of future charter schools in Alberta.

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Action on Research and Innovation: January 2011
The Future of Charter Schools in Alberta
24. Please comment on any other key areas related to the direction for future charter schools in Alberta that you wish to bring to the attention of Alberta Education.

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Thank you very much for completing the Future of Charter Schools in Alberta survey!