

Preparing for the future

Building a foundation for student success



The Alberta School Boards Association's
Presentation to Alberta's Commission on Learning

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The Alberta School Boards Association represents all of Alberta's public, separate and francophone school boards. To prepare this submission to Alberta's Commission on Learning, the association struck six task forces, which examined the critical issues in six key areas:

- funding
- governance
- learning outcomes
- roles (of teachers and their association)
- societal issues
- taxation

Each task force analyzed the issues, consulted with school boards and developed recommendations. The document you are reading reflects the results of this work.

The following individuals provided research and consulting services to support the work of the task forces: Jeffrey Bellinger of Nichols Applied Management, Terry Gunderson of Alter Group Inc. and Dr. Russ Wiebe of Wiebe Administrative Services. Additional information was gathered by means of a workbook circulated to association members in September 2002.

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For a list of publications which support this submission, please see the back cover. These publications and other information about the Alberta School Boards Association are available by request or on the association website:

<www.asba.ab.ca>



Preparing for the Future...

Building a foundation for student success

We believe in public education.

The Alberta School Boards Association represents the public, separate and francophone school boards, which are responsible for Alberta's public education system.

The association and its members believe in public education.

We believe that public education is the cornerstone of democracy. It develops creative thinkers and active, engaged citizens who contribute to

their communities, participate in the economy and work to build an inclusive society.

We believe that public education develops the potential and gifts of each child and provides a foundation for lifelong learning.

We believe that every child in Alberta has the right to free, accessible education. And every citizen has a stake in the public education system.

As elected representatives of our communities,

Alberta's school boards are entrusted with the responsibility to foster excellence in public education. It's a job we take very seriously.

All children in Alberta benefit from our province's world-class education system.

90% of Alberta's 590,000 school children are served by the **public education system**, which is governed by 62 public, separate and francophone school boards—all members of the Alberta School Boards Association

Alberta's public education system has achieved great things in the past century and a half. Today, Alberta's public education system boasts more than 1,700 schools and serves more than half a million students in all parts of the province.

Alberta's public education system is among the best in the world.

Alberta Learning reports that almost 90% of Albertans aged 25–34 have completed high school, and more than 55% have post-secondary credentials. Our high school completion rates continue to rise. Our students in all age groups do well on national and international achievement tests. And employers are satisfied with the knowledge and skills of Alberta graduates they hire.*

Alberta's school system works, and we have much to be proud of. But sustaining excellence is an ongoing challenge.

The development of education in Alberta has always been a community issue.

Alberta's first schools were established by Catholic and Protestant missionaries in the mid-19th century.

The North-West Territories School Ordinance, passed in 1884, established a system of Catholic and Protestant education.

By the time Alberta joined Confederation in 1905, this had evolved into a province-wide public education system which made local provisions for separate schools.

* Alberta grads are well prepared for the world of work. In 1999–2000, the satisfaction level of employers of post-secondary graduates was 86%. The satisfaction level for employers of apprentices was 97%. (Source: *Future Summit Delegate Package*, February 2002)

The Challenge Ahead

Our world is changing. With increasing globalization and the rapid pace of progress, our children need new skills—to take part in a fast-paced, knowledge-based economy and to deal with the demands of an ever-changing workplace.

Society is changing. Our communities are becoming more complex and more culturally diverse. Lifelong learning has become the order of the day as families, businesses and communities struggle to cope with an explosion of information and new technology.

As we wrestle with the challenges of the 21st century, many of Alberta's children still live in poverty. Many lack the stability of regular homes. And keeping our children safe is a growing concern.

At the same time, the new century offers a wealth of promise. We can draw on the strengths of Alberta's diverse population. We can capitalize on the opportunities offered by new ideas and new technology. But to do this, we must dare to dream. We must dare to engage in open, honest debate. And we must speak for and to our communities.

The Alberta School Boards Association welcomes the opportunity to add its voice to the debate which will define the learning system of the future. We are confident that, together with our colleagues in the learning partnership—teachers, parents, government, students, taxpayers and the community at large—we can make Alberta's public education system the very best it can be.

We know there are challenges. We've weathered some difficult times. And we know the education system faces difficult times ahead. But we recognize the tremendous potential of our province and our children and the enormous opportunities that lie ahead.

Our Vision

Our vision—one we share with our partners—is to **educate all children well**. What good education means, and what we want from the public education system, is a matter for Albertans as a society to decide. But one

A Vision for Public Education

Public education in Alberta has a three-fold mission:

1. to develop the potential and gifts of each child
2. to develop a foundation of learning that enables individuals to function effectively in further learning, work and life
3. to foster the development of active and contributing citizens of a democratic society

This vision was developed and approved by the following learning partners:

- Alberta School Boards Association
- Alberta Teachers' Association
- Alberta Home and School Councils Association
- Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association
- College of Alberta School Superintendents
- Association of School Business Officials of Alberta

thing is clear. The education system of the future must be responsive to changing learner needs and prepared to deal with the effects of globalization and rapid technological and social change.

Dealing with the Issues

To educate all children well, we must deal with the issues in a number of key areas:

- learning outcomes
- our changing society
- investing in the future
- taxation
- roles (of teachers and their association)
- governance

These are the warp and weft in the tapestry that is Alberta's public education system. Each thread is interwoven with the next, and each issue affects the whole.

The issue of **learning outcomes**, for example, reflects the **changing nature of our society**. Public education today is much different than it was even 10 years ago—let alone at the turn of the century. More and more, schools are providing a host of non-educational services in response to societal pressures such as poverty, illiteracy, the lack of learning readiness and the need for special education. The issue is one of mandate creep, and Albertans must decide where the boundaries lie. What do we expect from our education system? Whose job is what? And ultimately, who will pay?

There is no doubt that a properly functioning public education system must have appropriate funding. The Alberta School Boards Association believes that funding for education is an **investment in the future** and that all citizens have a responsibility to contribute. We also believe that, in order for school boards to be effective and accountable to their communities, some measure of local **taxation** authority must be restored.

The issue of taxation relates to the larger issue of **governance**, which deals with the roles and responsibilities of each player in the learning partnership. There are two key questions: Who should hold the ultimate authority for education? Who should run the public education system?

Locally elected school boards serve an important role as employers and as guardians of public education. But they do not govern in a vacuum. The **roles** and responsibilities of school boards are inextricably linked with the roles and responsibilities of other partners, including the provincial government, the Alberta Teachers' Association and teachers themselves.

There are no easy answers.

The issues are complex and interrelated, and the best solutions are not always readily apparent. A range of opinions exists even among the association's own membership. But ignoring problems doesn't make them go away.

Alberta's school boards are committed to excellence in public education. We are committed to building a public education system that is the best in the world. And we are committed to building for the future.

We join the debate in a spirit of openness and cooperation. We are open to new ideas and, like our partners, we are focused on what is best for students. Working together, we can make our public education system the very best it can be—for Alberta's children today and for future generations.

Learning Outcomes

An educated people are always a loyal people to good government; and the first object of a wise government should be the education of its people.

—Egerton Ryerson (1803–1882),
the founder of public education in Canada

"Ryerson History" [online]. Ryerson University. [Cited November 29, 2002.]
<www.ryerson.ca/archives/history.html>.

Alberta has an excellent education system, and it didn't happen by chance. It is the result of more than a century of careful planning and good management by a succession of provincial governments and school boards committed to the education of citizens.

Alberta's School Act and supporting legislation provide a solid framework for the education system. They define a well-crafted structure that serves the needs of both students and society.

While the School Act provides a foundation, the system could not succeed without excellent teachers, committed school boards and staff, involved parents and supportive communities. It could not thrive without effective student assessment measures, appropriate infrastructure and leading-edge curriculum.

Taken together, these elements define Alberta's education system—a system that can serve as a model for the world.

A Solid Foundation

The Alberta School Boards Association believes that Alberta's public education system will be strong and successful if all students

- learn to learn
- learn to be self-sufficient—in work and in life
- learn to be good citizens in a democratic society
- fulfill their intellectual, social, physical, emotional and spiritual potential

We celebrate our province's diversity.

The Alberta School Boards Association supports the Constitutional right of Alberta's Protestant, Catholic and francophone minorities to develop learning outcomes and delivery approaches that support the particular needs of their students.

These are timeless principles. But in an age when change is the only constant, educational curricula must be broad and adaptable enough to prepare students for the challenge of “interesting times.”

Curriculum for the Times

It is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today.

—Isaac Asimov, 1920–1992

“My Own View,” published in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, Robert Holdstock, ed. As cited in *The Columbia World of Quotations* [online]. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. <www.bartleby.com/66/2/4602.html>. [November 30, 2002.]

The Alberta School Boards Association is committed to building consensus and shaping change that meets the needs of students and communities. To do this effectively, school boards must continue to have the ability to develop curriculum in response to local needs. Just as importantly, the Alberta School Boards Association must continue to have a voice in the curriculum development process. It must have a place at the table when province-wide learning outcomes and expectations are being defined.

Money talks

The Alberta School Boards Association supports Alberta’s definition of basic education as outlined in Ministerial Order 004/98. It also believes that the requirements specified in the definition must be fully funded.

In today’s fast-paced world, Alberta’s education system will continue to change in response to new circumstances and new demands. Albertans’ expectations of the education system will continue to evolve. And Alberta’s definition of basic education will continue to change in response to the issues and challenges of the future.

Regardless of how basic education is defined, one thing is clear. Printed words on a page are not enough. Funding is needed to translate words and ideas into realities in the classroom.

To put it bluntly, money talks. The government must be prepared to fund what it believes is a basic, core level of education for all students in Alberta, no matter where they live. If funding is not forthcoming, the

definition of basic education must be changed. And Albertans must lower their expectations of what the education system should provide.

School Work and Careers: Making the Connection

A generation ago, a high school diploma was a golden ticket to the world of work. But times have changed. Recent occupational projections predict that 60% of all new jobs created between 2000 and 2005 will require some form of post-secondary learning.

Connecting Kindergarten to Grade 12 and beyond

The amalgamation of K–12 and advanced education under the Ministry of Learning offered the promise of a well-articulated system of lifelong learning. While the promise remains, we need to work harder to make this happen.

Alberta's K–12 curriculum and post-secondary entrance requirements are not as interconnected as they should be. Specified prerequisites sometimes have little to do with the actual requirements of a particular career choice. What purpose should prerequisites serve? Should they help students succeed? Or do they become an arbitrary screening mechanism that safeguards scarce placements at university or college?

Skills for the workplace

Approximately 40% of today's high school graduates will go directly into the workforce. Some of these students will enter apprenticeship programs or enrol in courses of study which facilitate the transition from school to work.

The Alberta curriculum includes a number of Career and Technology Studies (CTS) courses designed to help students prepare for the world of work. The success of CTS has not been evaluated in any formal way. Is the program meeting its objectives? Is it making a difference for students? Is it money well spent? Or are improvements required?

Informed decisions cannot be made until a baseline has been established. An independent study is needed to assess the actual impact of CTS—on

students, schools, school districts, teachers, post-secondary institutions, businesses and industry.

Smoothing the path

Whether students move from school to work or school to post-secondary studies, the transition should be seamless. Regardless of their destination, what they learn from kindergarten through Grade 12 should prepare them for the next step.

The lack of appropriate links between the public education system, the post-secondary education system and the world of work creates artificial barriers. Alberta's students deserve better.

It's up to us—school boards, teachers and government—to address this issue. We must connect the various pieces of the learning system in a way that makes sense. We must remove the barriers to student success. And we must work harder to address the needs of students who drop out or turn 19 before they finish high school.

Standards and Measurements

The provincial government is responsible for prescribing curriculum for each grade and subject in the K–12 system. The government also sets standards, prescribes textbooks and learning resources, and measures student achievement.

The Alberta School Boards Association supports the need for provincial standards in education because they provide a measure of the effectiveness of the public education system. While Alberta's high standards demonstrate the strength of our system, assessment practices must be regularly evaluated to ensure they are in sync with current realities.

For effective assessment, examination timetables and requirements must be flexible and fair. For example, students should be able to write their Provincial Achievement Tests in the same year that they study the curriculum being tested. If a girl in a split Grade 5–6 class studies the Grade 6 Social Studies curriculum when she is in Grade 5, she should be allowed to write the Grade 6 achievement test when she is in Grade 5.

Assessments must relate to particular programs of study. For example, students enrolled in the Integrated Occupational Program should be assessed on the basis of the requirements specified for that particular program.

Building on Local Strengths

From cyber schools to arts and sports programs to faith- or language-based education, programs of choice are a strength of Alberta's school system.

Edmonton Public's Victoria School of Performing & Visual Arts offers fine arts-based programming from K-12.

Wild Rose School Division offers an alternative Christian program focused on a faith-based approach to learning.

Edmonton Catholic's Fresh Start is an outreach program for 16- to 19-year-olds who are not attending "regular" school.

Developed by the Greater St. Albert and Red Deer Catholic school boards, St. Gabriel is a cyber school partnership which offers virtual programs to 460 students from Grades 4 through 12.

Calgary Public's National Sports School program meets the academic needs of elite athletes.

These are just a few of the diverse program choices available in Alberta's public, Catholic and francophone schools.

The Alberta School Boards Association believes that a strong, relevant education system must be flexible enough to accommodate local needs and circumstances.

School boards must retain the right to set locally developed curriculum. While the province should determine curriculum outcomes and standards, local boards must have the right to choose instructional resources and methods of delivery that best meet students' needs.

Different Strokes for Different Folks

The three faces of public education—public, separate and francophone—offer parents a rich selection of choices. Within this educational macrocosm, students and parents can also choose from a wide variety of specialties and approaches—second language or immersion schools, faith-based schools, military academies, self-study approaches, virtual schools and more.

The variety of Alberta's schools and educational approaches mirrors the diversity of the province's people. It respects the right of

parents to choose the kinds of programs their children can take.

The Alberta School Boards Association is a strong supporter of the principle of choice. But the right to choose must be founded on fairness.

Currently students who choose charter school education are eligible for transportation funds from the public purse; students whose “programs of choice” are within the public education system should receive the same consideration.

While charter schools can choose the students they serve, the public education system welcomes *all* children—regardless of their skills, talents, background or ability to pay. Public schools serve the interests of society as a whole. As a result, fair funding and equitable access to programs of choice within the public system are particularly important.

Let’s ensure that our public education system is well supported.

Meeting student needs

An effective learning system responds to the needs of individual students. It recognizes each student’s talents, interests and learning styles.

“Making the school fit the student” has been identified as an important strategy for removing barriers to high school completion.

More and more students are pursuing independent learning programs through technological and other means.

Schools and school boards acknowledge the need to do more to address this issue. We need to design a learning system that supports students, meets their individual needs and improves their chances of success—both at school and in life.

Citizens of Alberta, Citizens of the World

More than ever before, Albertans live in a global community. And in any community, it’s important to get to know the neighbours.

International education offers great potential for “building bridges,” sharing ideas, fostering intercultural understanding and getting to know how our neighbors live. In the long term, it offers great opportunities for strengthening and improving Alberta’s economy.

Alberta has much to share with the rest of the world, and much to gain in return. While Alberta’s school boards recognize the potential of international education, designing an appropriate framework is a weighty matter—and one which requires further debate.

The Alberta School Boards Association welcomes the opportunity to work with the provincial government in developing a framework for international education. Our challenge is two-fold. We need legislation and policies that make sense for Albertans. And we need to find the right balance between our obligations to our students and our responsibilities as citizens of the world.

Public Education for a Changing Society

In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future.

—Eric Hoffer, 1902–1983

Reflections on the Human Condition

As cited in *The Columbia World of Quotations*.
New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

www.bartleby.com/66/76/28576.html. [November 30, 2002.]

Just as they were a century ago, schools today are the heart of their communities. But today's communities are changing.

Society is becoming more diverse, more complex and more dangerous. Bullying and substance abuse are growing concerns. Our population is aging. Families are smaller. More people are living in cities, and our rural communities are feeling the effects.

Child poverty, increasing cultural diversity and demographic shifts are creating new challenges for schools and school boards. Among these challenges is a growing urgency for public education to do a better job of meeting the needs of Alberta's Aboriginal students.

The pain of poverty

The foundations of lifelong learning and good health are established in the early years of a child's life—long before the child starts school. But many children face barriers to learning. Poverty and the lack of family literacy may put these children at risk and keep them from realizing their full potential.

Poverty is among the most serious challenges facing schools today. Some 22% of Alberta children are growing up poor. In Alberta's cities, the figures are even higher: poverty is a reality for 32% of children in

Edmonton and 24% of children in Calgary. The figures are even more staggering for Alberta's Aboriginal peoples.

The effects of poverty have profound implications for children's ability to learn. Poverty often means that kids come to school hungry and cold. They suffer from poor nutrition and the resulting health-related problems. Their family situations are not always stable and they often don't have access to books and enriching learning experiences that other children enjoy.

With a head full of worries and an empty stomach, how can a child learn?

Societal Issues Task Force Member
Alberta School Boards Association

Aboriginal education gets a failing grade

Poverty is a fact of life for many of Alberta's Aboriginal children. The statistics are startling. In 1996, 41% reported income less than \$20,000; the rate for other Albertans was 22%. At more than 17%, the unemployment rate for Aboriginal people is much higher than the 5% average for the

general population. And the unemployment rate for Aboriginal young people, aged 15 to 24, is 24%.

Aboriginal Albertans experience higher rates of suicide and violence than other Albertans. They experience a higher incidence of debilitating diseases like diabetes and tuberculosis. And their life expectancy is seven years lower.

In a progressive society, in the nation's most prosperous province, how can one group of people be so disadvantaged?

The reasons are complex, but lack of education is, to some degree, to blame.

The relationship between education, employment and becoming a fully participating citizen in our society is well known. Each additional year of education increases an

Canada's Aboriginal Community: What the numbers say...

The issues facing Aboriginal peoples are not confined to Alberta. They are a challenge for all Canadians.

- 6% of Alberta's people are Aboriginal.
- The Aboriginal population is growing at a rate of 2% per year—twice as fast as the Canadian population as a whole.
- Alberta's Aboriginal population is significantly younger than the general population. In 1996, 46% of Alberta's Aboriginal people were under 20.
- Alberta's Aboriginal people have tremendous potential to contribute to the province's economy and to our social and cultural life. Education is the key that can make this happen.

individual's earnings by 8%. Too many of Alberta's Aboriginal students aren't completing high school.

Our education system has failed these students. It has failed their communities. It has failed the next generation of children who will be born poor and disadvantaged because their parents haven't completed school and can't provide for their needs.

The public education system must do better by these students. We *must* stop the cycle.

Dealing with diversity

Today's schools serve a more heterogeneous population and more diverse family groupings than the schools of Alberta's pioneer days. Today's children often come from non-traditional families, single-parent families, or families where both parents work. As Alberta's families struggle to deal with the demands on their time, schools face pressure to "fill the gap" with

Schools deal with more than education.

Programs such as **Breakfast for Learning**, **DARE** (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) and **Outreach School** give children in St. Albert Protestant Schools much-needed support.

Edmonton Public translates material into more than 50 languages to meet the needs of their students.

before- and after-school care programs, breakfast programs and lunch-hour supervision.

New Canadians from different countries bring unique needs to Alberta's classrooms. They need English as a Second Language (ESL) services and programs to help them integrate into the culture of their new country. While assessing and placing ESL students is a necessity, it is also a costly proposition.

Demographic shifts

Alberta's population is increasingly urban.

Rural students must cope with the realities of multi-grading and long bus rides to school and back. Rural school boards must overcome the difficulties of attracting and keeping teachers in their communities particularly teachers in specialist areas such as math and science. Because

their school enrolments are relatively small, rural boards face additional challenges in offering their students the complete, equitable program opportunities they deserve.

As Albertans move from the country to the city—or from city centres to the suburbs—school boards face the challenge of keeping small schools viable.

By 2026, one in five Albertans will be over 65.

As our population ages, the demand for health care services is expected to increase. Meeting this demand must not come at the expense of reduced funding for education.

Viable schools support viable communities

In the inner city or in the country, schools are the glue that binds communities together. They are a meeting place and a learning place for the entire community—not just those members of school age. Even when their enrolments are low, schools fulfill an important social and socializing role. The implications of closing such schools must be carefully considered.

The Real Issue Is Mandate Creep

Schools are the lifeblood of our communities...For many children, they are the only place where they are safe and cared for, and where someone knows them.

Societal Issues Task Force Member
Alberta School Boards Association

Schools are no longer just houses of learning. Those days are long past.

More and more, schools are taking on new roles to meet their students' and parents' needs. Schools provide medical services, counselling,

occupational and physical therapy, hot lunch programs, pre-school and after school-care, and a host of additional services beyond their mandate to provide education.

Schools have taken on these roles because they have had no choice. Every day, schools and teachers deal with all types of students—the hungry, the angry, the disabled, the sick and the hurt. The needs of these students cannot be overlooked. They cannot be passed on. They are real and immediate, and they need immediate attention. As one ASBA member noted:

Our students are with us every day. They're not clients who drop in for a fifteen-minute appointment and a prescription or a chat. We see their problems firsthand, and we know their needs. Their problems are our problems, throughout the school day and beyond. We have to deal with them. We have no choice.

How do schools cope with the growing demands on their resources? How do boards handle the growing expectations for non-educational services?

As best as we are able.

Schools and school boards rely on voluntary services and create community partnerships. We fundraise and lobby and invent creative solutions to deal with the challenges our students face. And we divert precious instructional dollars from the classroom to special programs and crisis intervention.

The situation is unsustainable. A better solution must be found. The question is, “Where do the responsibilities of social service agencies end and the responsibilities of the education system begin—and end?”

If the provision of non-educational services is the responsibility of schools, appropriate funding must be made available to support this new role.

If schools don't provide social, medical and counselling services, someone must be ready to “take the baton” and provide the full range of services students need.

Toward a Solution

Meeting the needs of Alberta's children

Services for children must be provided in a holistic way that recognizes the totality of the child and serves the needs of mind, body and spirit.

The Alberta School Boards Association believes that school boards, regional health boards, mental health authorities, child and family services agencies, and the youth justice system must work together to coordinate the delivery of services to school children.

We must develop better models. Clear accountability and authority must be defined. And adequate, long-term funding must be provided for *all* the services children need—including early intervention and counselling programs; nutrition and anger management programs; ESL programs; children's mental health initiatives; supports for parents in need; programs which meet the special needs of Alberta's Aboriginal students; and programs which help teachers deal with cultural diversity, individual learning styles and other challenges of the 21st-century classroom.

In meeting the needs of our children, we must develop innovative solutions. For example, offering incentives might help to recruit and retain teachers in remote communities. One such incentive might be a two-for-one pension offer, in which a teacher receives two years of pensionable salary for every year of teaching in a remote location.

Parents, teachers and communities are partners in education. Working together, we can find the best solutions for Alberta's children.

St. Paul's **PAUSE** program—**Putting Accountability Upon Students' Education**—offers counselling and anger management services to students who have been suspended. It also provides help with school work and help students set goals.

The program works because students, parents and teachers pull together to build success.

A stitch in time...

Children who start school ready to learn have a better chance of success in life. For some of Alberta's children, early intervention gives them that chance.

The Alberta School Boards Association commends the provincial government's initiatives for early intervention. Programs such as the Early Literacy Initiative, the Early Childhood Development Initiative and the Alberta Children and Youth Initiative identify children at risk and help provide adequate nutrition and good parenting. These programs help to promote family wellness. This buffers the effects of a poor beginning and helps students succeed in school. Existing programs merely scratch the surface. We must do much more.

Success tomorrow often depends on preventative measures today. Spending on programs today can prevent fetal alcohol syndrome and teen pregnancy in the future. Investing in family literacy can help children break the cycle of poverty and unemployment. Investing in full-day kindergarten or programs for three- and four-year-olds can give kids the head start they need to catch up with their peers.

Early intervention can make a difference.

Lethbridge SD #51 has developed a number of programs to assist students affected by poverty and to provide support to their families.

*The district's **Making Connections** program coordinates home, school and community resources to support the academic and social development of at-risk students. The program has had good results in improving the attendance, behaviour and learning outcomes—both for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.*

In other parts of the province, early intervention programs such as **Head Start** and **Success By Six** help children overcome the barriers of poverty and start school ready to learn.

Aboriginal education: suggestions and best practices

Cultural differences, negative stereotypes, the lack of role models and the geographic remoteness of many Aboriginal communities pose barriers to success of Alberta's Aboriginal students. These are problems that cannot be ignored.

The Alberta School Boards Association is committed to working with the provincial government and with Alberta's Aboriginal communities to help Aboriginal students succeed in school.

The association endorses the strategies and recommendations in the *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Educational Policy Framework*. A number of programs have already been launched in support of these strategies.

- Strategy 2.12 of the framework calls for parents, the community and other stakeholders to work together to meet Aboriginal students' essential needs.

Northland School Division has implemented a number of school-based programs to meet the needs of its predominantly Aboriginal student population. Because many students live in remote locations, the division covers the cost of transportation to school. The School Food Services program provides students with a nutritious lunch. Other initiatives address the issues of student attendance and drop-out rates.

- Strategy 2.3 calls for increasing awareness of Aboriginal history, languages, cultures and other issues.

Special schools such as the Edmonton Public School Board's Amiskwaciy Academy give students the opportunity to achieve academic excellence while honouring traditional values, customs, knowledge and experience.

- Strategy 3.11 calls for expanded literacy initiatives designed and delivered at the community level.

Close to a third of the students in the Northern Lights School Division are Aboriginal, and more than 20% are coded special education students. In 2000–2001, the division launched its Read to Succeed program for over-age beginning readers in Grades 4 through 12. Two-thirds of the students who participate reach a

“take-off” stage in their reading skills, and about half make 1.5–3 times the gains of their age-mates. In conjunction with the division’s Early Literacy Initiative and Just Read program, Read to Succeed helps students do well at school and beyond.

- Strategy 3.32 calls for increased access to apprenticeship opportunities.

Fort McMurray Public School District’s Native Education Project promotes career transitions and transitions to post-secondary education.

Provincial initiatives such as the Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project also support this goal.

Although these and other programs show great promise, our work has just begun. We will need to find ways to share ideas and best practices as these are developed across the province. And we will need to do much more to give Alberta’s Aboriginal students the education they deserve. The ASBA will convene an aboriginal education summit to identify more initiatives and best practices to address this critical problem.

Taxation

The tool that keeps the public in public education

Alberta’s school boards serve the public interest by providing education to students in their jurisdiction. In fulfilling this role, school boards help to build society. They help young Albertans become well-rounded, lifelong learners who participate in the economy and make a difference in their communities.

School boards have a responsibility to the students in the education system. They are accountable to the provincial government for ensuring that standards, legislation and regulations are implemented. They are accountable to the citizens who elect them and to the taxpayers of the communities they serve.

School boards speak for the entire community—including the 70% of Albertans who do not have children in school. They must be closely linked to their communities—and responsive to community needs.

What makes school boards accountable? What makes them responsive?

The very fact that they are democratically elected representatives who are in tune with local issues and needs. A key part of their role is responding to these needs. If they do not, the trust of their communities is withdrawn when board performance is evaluated—every three years at election time.

School board accountability is measured in terms of results. Boards are judged by the number of students who achieve high standards or complete high school. They are judged by the way they deal with their employees and respond to the concerns of parents. They are evaluated on the way they balance their budgets. And they are assessed on their effectiveness in spending tax dollars.

There's the rub.

In 1994, school funding and taxation were centralized at the provincial level. Since that time, school taxes have been pooled in the Alberta School

Foundation Fund (ASFF) and redistributed according to the province's funding formula.[†]

First school tax levied in 1881.

Alberta's public school system dates to 1881, when a group of Edmonton citizens decided to build a school that would be open to all children, free of charge. They decided what they and their neighbours could afford to pay, and levied the first school tax—long before Alberta became a province, and even before Alberta's first School Ordinance was passed in 1884.

The legislative changes introduced in 1994 include a provision for a special levy which allows school boards to raise 3% of their annual budgets. The levy can only be imposed once a plebiscite has been approved by constituents in a school board election year.

While the new system has moved us toward much-needed funding equity across the province, the 3% special levy provision has not worked. As a result of the reforms of 1994, school boards no longer have the power to tax their constituents.

[†]Separate school boards have the legislative ability to opt out of the ASFF. Boards which opt out receive revenue directly from municipalities. Since opting out is a revenue-neutral proposition, it is ignored for the purposes of this report.

Losing the power to tax has had many repercussions.

In losing the power to tax, **school boards have lost a critical connection to their communities.** They no longer have the ability to raise funds to respond to community priorities or local needs.

School boards have lost authority. The province provides school boards with all funding for education. School boards have no control over the amount of money available to spend on local public education.

They have lost the ability to respond to provincial funding cutbacks by taxing at a local level. The result has been greater reliance on school-based fundraising.

They have lost a critical accountability link. School board decision making is confined to the expenditure side of the budget—a situation that raises red flags for economists. Without the power to tax, it is too easy for school boards—like parents, teachers and taxpayers—just to point at the province and say, “Give us more.” It would be better to say, “We agree this is a local priority. We will raise taxes to launch this program.”

Considering All the Options

The issue of taxation is a complex one, and the Alberta School Boards Association has worked hard to develop creative solutions. In 1999, ASBA and the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) established a partnership to examine issues related to educational financing and property taxes. As a result of this dialogue, school boards have come to understand municipalities’ pressing need for secure, stable funding. Recommendations approved by both partners were presented for government consideration.

Tax Rates in Alberta

In 1994, the average provincial residential mill rate for education was 7.52%; the average expenditure per student in 1993–1994 was \$5,383.

In 1999, the average provincial residential mill rate for education was 6.95%; the average expenditures per student in 1998–1999 were \$6,151.

The ASBA and AUMA agree that school boards need direct access to the property tax base for “a measure” of educational funding. However, a number of issues require further discussion. For

example, what is the appropriate balance between local and provincial

taxation? Between provincial equity and local responsiveness? What mechanisms must be in place to ensure that school boards and municipalities have the flexibility and funding they need to meet long- and short-term needs?

Funding and taxation: two sides of the same coin

The issue of taxation is intricately linked to the larger issue of funding for education. Over the past eight years, the revenues collected from property taxes have decreased. The overall dollars allocated to education have increased in this period, as has the average expenditure per student.

As we stated in our submission to the Financial Management Commission earlier this year, the Alberta School Boards Association believes that school boards must have access to long-term stable funding in order to fulfill our mandate to educate students. Since 1994, only the provincial government has a large enough resource base to provide the needed funds for public education.

As with taxation, a number of questions require more in-depth analysis and discussion. For example, should provincial funding vary from board to board? What criteria should be used? The current review of the funding framework is exploring these issues.

The Alberta School Boards Association is willing to explore all options in our quest to do the best job for our students and our communities. We welcome the opportunity to work with the provincial government to revise the taxation mechanism for education.

Modifying the Special School Tax Levy

Let's try a new way

Direct access to the local property tax base and the ability to tax are fundamental to school board autonomy, accountability and responsiveness to their communities.

—ASBA Guiding Principle
Approved: FGM 2000

The Alberta School Boards Association proposes that the 3% provision in the existing framework should be modified to address immediate concerns

and to enhance the critical connection between school boards and their communities.

The Alberta School Boards Association recommends retaining the Special School Tax Levy with the following modifications:

- Allow for a special levy of up to 3% of a board's budget to be authorized annually, upon a board motion.
- Eliminate the requirement for a plebiscite.
- Require that school boards hold public hearings before approving special levies.
- Prohibit provincial clawbacks of locally raised funds.

The association believes that the requirement for boards to provide a rationale for a Special School Tax Levy should be retained. It recommends reviewing the revised mechanism after five years. The review will ensure

- that the levy has not had a negative effect on equity among boards
- that it has enhanced the responsiveness of boards to meet local needs
- that it has improved public accountability

Special levies serve special purposes

The Special School Tax Levy is not designed as an equity measure: equity should be established and maintained through the provincial funding formula. Nor is the levy intended to replace the provincial contribution to education funding.

Modifying the Special School Tax Levy has a number of benefits.

The proposed modifications

- protect equity among school jurisdictions
- simplify the levy process and make it more effective
- make it possible for boards to respond to the educational needs of their communities
- ensure that boards are accountable to the electorate

If a school board chose to implement a 3% levy, on average it could generate 50 cents per student per day—or a total of \$200 per student per year.

This is not enough to relieve the funding pressures school boards face. Nor is it enough to tip the equity cart. It *is* enough to fund a special program or a special project that the community has designated as a priority—in much the same way that parent fundraising raises revenue for special projects in their children’s schools.

Investing in the Future

Education costs money, but then so does ignorance.

—Sir Claus Moser, 1922—

As cited in *The Columbia World of Quotations*.
New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
<www.bartleby.com/66/59/40759.html>. [December 5, 2002.]

Investing in education is an investment in the future. It ensures that our children will have opportunities and choices. It develops good thinkers, good problem-solvers and good citizens who have the will and the skills to build a strong economy and a prosperous, democratic society.

Investing in education benefits *all* Albertans. It is our best hope that our children and our children’s children will be lifelong learners who are equipped to face the challenges of the future.

Albertans support an innovative, well-managed public education system. And they’re prepared to pay for it.

Building for the future—and sustaining excellence in education—depends on adequate, stable, long-term funding.

For all practical purposes, school boards are totally dependent upon the provincial government for funding. Although education funding has increased in recent years, current levels of funding do not meet current needs.

The Alberta School Boards Association believes that current provincial funding for K–12 education is insufficient.

Funding is insufficient because what we demand from the education system is dramatically different from what we expected even a few years ago.

- Albertans expect higher standards.
- We expect our schools to offer program choices.
- We expect them to be equipped with the latest textbooks and state-of-the-art information and communication technology.
- We expect second language programs, career training, enrichment activities and more—to prepare our kids for success.

Funding is insufficient because the role of education has changed.

- The classroom of today is far more diverse and complex than the classroom of generations past.
- More than ever before, today’s classrooms address our children’s physical, emotional, medical and mental health needs.
- Our schools offer integrated programs for children with special needs. They offer special programs to keep them safe and secure. They offer English as a Second Language programs for children who need them, speech pathology or occupational therapy when our children need that, literacy programs, breakfast and lunch programs, counselling services, parenting support and more.

All these things help to create an excellent education system that does the best it can for every student. And they all come with a price.

Funding to school boards has not kept pace with the changing expectations and growing demands placed on our schools. For too many years, school boards have had to juggle their budgets. They have had to divert resources from

The Alberta School Boards Association Supports the nine principles identified in the Funding Framework Review. It believes a critical tenth principle is required—that is, the principle of sufficiency.

1. Accountability
2. Consistency
3. Equity
4. Flexibility
5. Predictability and Stability
6. Minimal Administration
7. Transparency
8. Maintenance of Provincial Goals
9. Simplicity
10. **Sufficiency**

basic instructional services to other needs. What's the result? A serious erosion in the level of service schools provide to their students.

It's not too late to repair the damage. But to do this, education funding must be sufficient to meet program delivery needs. It must be sufficient to cover the actual program needs of all our students.

The Alberta School Boards Association has identified four funding pressure points:

- special education
- technology
- operations and maintenance
- salary expectations

It has developed funding recommendations for each of these areas.[‡] Addressing these recommendations will help school boards “catch up” and restore essential services. It will help to create a platform of excellence—“a springboard to the leading edge”—and pave the way for new ideas and new opportunities.

Just imagine the teaching and learning possibilities that the SuperNet might bring...

Or the great strides a special needs child might make if all her program needs were met...

Once the pressure points are relieved, Alberta's school boards will be well positioned to meet other challenges. We can hire librarians to help our kids navigate the age of information. We can hire counsellors to deal with our kids' emotional needs. We can create enrichment programs for gifted children. We can reach out to kids in need. We can

invest our creativity, our energy and our resources in other important areas. The options are infinite.

How much do we need to get to the leading edge? We estimate approximately \$400 million per year—or \$800 per student per year, or \$4 per student per day. It's a small price to pay for excellence.

[‡] The dollar figures listed in the funding recommendations represent our estimate of the shortfall between current funding grants and actual funding needs. Maintaining services requires that these funds be available each year and that they be adjusted to account for inflation.

Investing in Special Needs Students

In recent years, Alberta has made great strides in the education of students with special needs. But progress has come with a price.

There is a serious gap between what school boards receive to serve special needs students and the real costs of serving these students. Current funding levels are not sufficient to meet the provincial mandate, parental expectations or what the courts rule.

As school boards scrimp to provide crucial services, every child in the classroom is affected. It is time for the provincial government to step up to the plate. Funding the real cost of educating special needs students will ensure that gains for these students do not come at the expense of other students in our classrooms.

The Alberta School Boards Association recommends investing an additional \$11.7 million per year to meet the needs of severely disabled students, and an additional \$114.5 million per year to meet the needs of students with mild and moderate disabilities. Another \$4.2 million per year should be set aside in a funding pool which would help school boards pay for high-cost programs for students with severe disabilities. Funds should also be invested to meet the needs of gifted children and to help school boards adapt their facilities for special needs students.

The issue of funding for special needs is closely linked to the issue of integration. Parents, schools and school boards must work together to determine the best options for special needs children—whether these are in integrated or non-integrated settings. In either case, funding must follow the student.

School boards must receive funding for the “real children” they have in their jurisdictions. Blanket funding formulas based on total student enrolments are not appropriate, nor are caps on the numbers of students who may be classified as having special needs. In addition, students with emotional or behavioral disabilities should be funded at the same rate as other students with severe disabilities. (Current funding rates for emotional or behavioral disabilities are \$1,641 lower.)

What's in a name?

Appropriate funding for special needs children is sometimes a matter of appropriate definitions. A child who is classified as having a severe special need in kindergarten may no longer qualify for the same level of funding when he enters Grade 1. Although this child's need has not changed, a different definition applies in Grade 1. While the effect may be to save dollars in the short-term, ignoring the need simply escalates the problem. The child is denied the support that will help him succeed to the best of his ability, or the support is continued at the expense of other equally meritorious priorities. When the child is older, the cost of providing this support will be much higher, and the results may well be less positive.

Investing in Technology

Science and technology multiply around us. To an increasing extent they dictate the languages in which we speak and think. Either we use those languages, or we remain mute.

-J.G. Ballard, 1930

From *Crash*. As cited in *The Columbia World of Quotations*.
New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
<www.bartleby.com/66/36/5336.html>. [December 5, 2002.]

The *Educational Quarterly Review* (Statistics Canada 2002, Vol. 8, No. 4) reports that 88% of Canada's 15-year-olds have access to a computer at home and 69% have an Internet connection.[§]

While technology can never replace good teaching, it is an important tool—and one that is indispensable in the modern world. For our children to succeed in a knowledge-based economy, they must learn the language of technology. Just as importantly, they must learn to use technology as a tool for learning.

The use of technology in education is expected to improve learning outcomes and, in many spheres, Alberta leads the way. The Alberta SuperNet is a powerful tool that will open new doors—for students and for teachers—and facilitate the delivery of learning over distance. The possibilities are exciting, especially for rural Alberta, but the costs are enormous as well.

[§] The cited study was conducted in 2000.

It is important that Alberta's schools be full participants in the technological revolution. Minimal standards are not enough. We must strive to be truly world class. And we cannot afford to leave anyone behind.

Alberta school jurisdictions receive \$43 per student in earmarked funding to supplement the cost of technology. Their actual spending averages \$142 per student—\$99 more than the government provides.** While school boards have tried to keep pace on the technology front, it has meant diverting resources from other, equally worthy classroom priorities. And keeping pace is a far cry from being on the leading edge.

For schools to fully benefit from the SuperNet and other information and communication technology, a substantial increase in funding is required. The annual shortfall between technology funding and technology expenditures is \$78.5 million. Investing this amount would help bring our students to the leading edge.

Investing in Maintenance and Operations

Proper funding for the ongoing maintenance of our schools is not a luxury. Simply put, it's prudent fiscal management.

The provincial government's School Facility Task Force recommended that private sector benchmarks—4% of the cost of replacement capital—be used to set ongoing maintenance budgets. The recommendation was never implemented. Additionally, Alberta's school construction and modernization system is totally dependent on the availability of provincial revenue surpluses. This drives up the costs of construction. The inevitable result is that we do not have the right schools in the right places at the right time to support Alberta's burgeoning economic growth.

The Alberta School Boards Association recommends an immediate funding increase of \$60 million per year to operate and maintain Alberta's

**This figure is an estimate derived from a sample of 12 school boards which reported their actual technology costs in Audited Financial Statements for 2001–2002. Within this sample, the range varied from \$68 to \$255 per student. There is significant evidence that the calculated average, \$142 per student, is well below the actual cost of technology. In its *Investigating the Total Cost of Ownership in Schools* report (2001), Alberta Learning reports the average cost associated with all technology-related expenditures was \$310 per student.

schools. It believes that the costs of electricity, natural gas and insurance should be indexed against base costs established for the 1999–2000 school year. If actual costs are higher than those in the base year, the government should provide school boards with additional funds.

School boards should be reimbursed for the costs of leasing facilities required for successful outreach programs. These facilities are centrally located to provide easy access for students; that usually means that market lease rates apply.

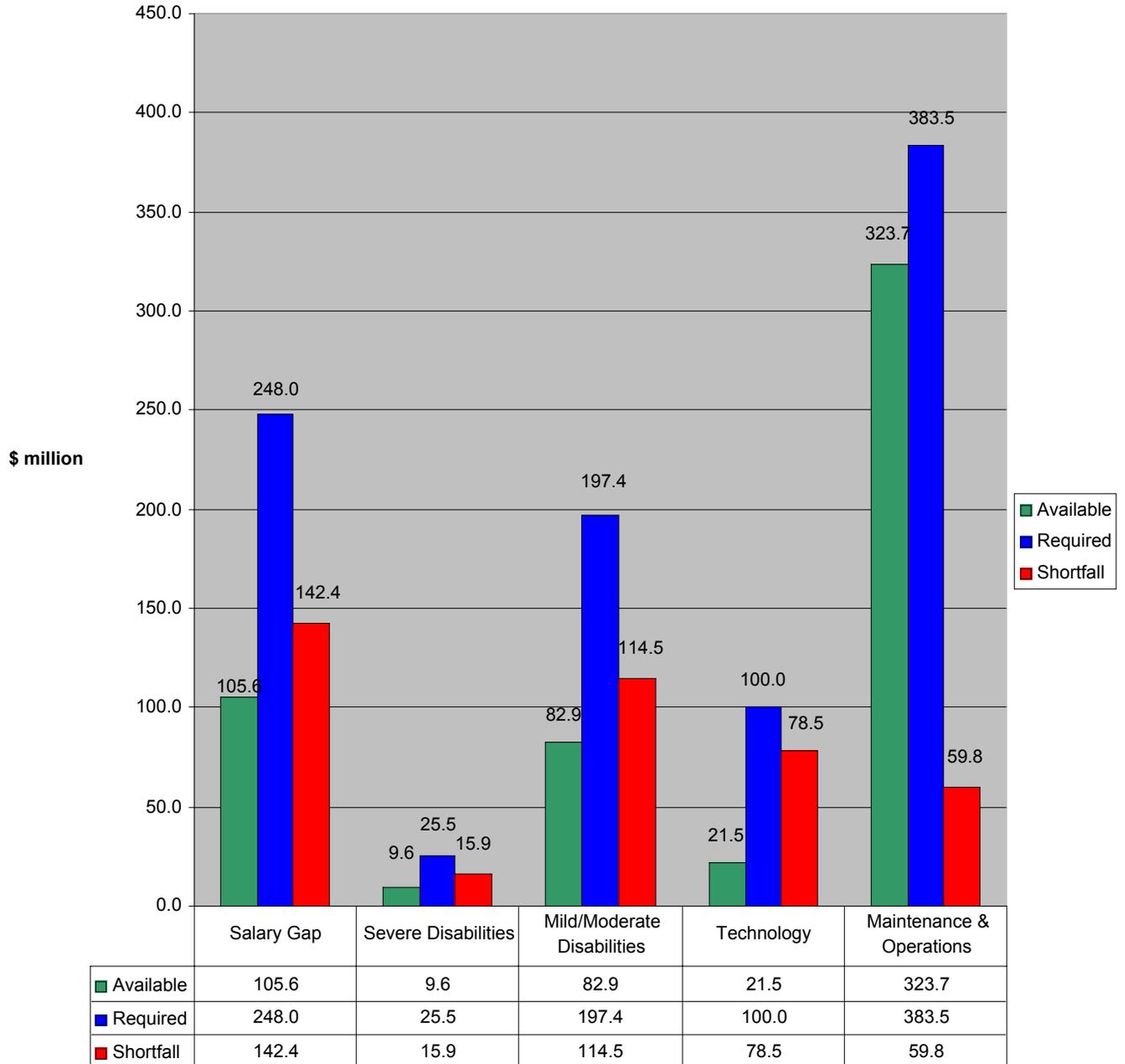
The current Area, Capacity and Utilization Guidelines for schools built before 1980 should be reviewed and revised. And we also believe that new school construction and modernization should be budgeted for and funded as they are needed – not only when the province has revenue surpluses.

Addressing the Salary Gap

The government should provide sufficient funds to enable school boards to provide fair salaries and benefits for all employees without compromising the quality of services we provide to students. A funding increase of \$142.4 million is needed to bridge the gap between the arbitrated 14% salary increase awarded to teachers and the 6% increase provided by the provincial government for teachers' salaries.

The recent arbitrated settlements for teachers have created pressures in other parts of the staffing mix as non-teaching staff look for raises of the same magnitude and the gap between school administrators and district administrators is narrowed.

Funding Requirements



* Shortfall for severely disabled students includes a "funding pool" of \$4.2 million for high cost students

Planning for the Future

As we indicated in our submission to the Financial Management Commission earlier this year, school boards must have access to long-term, stable, predictable funding. The funding formula must be flexible so that boards can address local needs. While targeted funding restricts discretionary spending, it has proven successful in programs such as AISI—the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement—which has sponsored a number of much-needed projects.

The Alberta School Boards Association recommends that AISI funding continue on an ongoing basis rather than for time-specific projects. It believes that AISI funds should remain targeted funds and that they should be included as revenue in administration envelope calculations.

A one-size-fits-all model doesn't work

Education funding must consider the profile of students and the special needs of each jurisdiction. “Average” funding requirements may not meet the needs of every board. In rural areas, for example, the strict application of per capita funding formulas makes it difficult for school boards to serve their students well.

Funding stability is critical

The volatility of provincial revenues and legislative constraints on deficit financing continues to pose significant challenges for school boards. School boards saw the impact this year; mid-year funding cuts to education and Children’s Services had a direct impact on school programs and on the children we serve. Because school boards plan in a multi-year environment, reductions in previously forecasted grants make planning difficult. This is particularly true for capital projects. New school construction cannot be dependent on the year-to-year vagaries of provincial revenue.

The Alberta School Boards Association strongly supports the principle of a revenue stabilization fund. We urge the government to make the legislative and accounting practice changes needed to support such an endeavour.

The Need for Innovation

As learning communities, schools and school boards are challenged to model a commitment to implementing research-based innovations that result in better service to students. This commitment also speaks to our drive to ensure and build on the continued excellence of our education system.

The Alberta School Boards Association believes that Alberta would benefit from a dedicated research and development fund designed to foster innovation in the K–12 sector. Similar funds, such as the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, have yielded great benefits over the years. An “Alberta Learning Innovation Fund” could do the same, and provide dividends for all Albertans well into the future.

Governance

Education is not the concern of parents and children alone; it is the underpinning of civil society and a key defining element of the future which we will all inherit—parents and non-parents alike. Elected school boards have always recognized this by offering all citizens an opportunity to select their representatives and to put their names forward as candidates for trusteeship. The principle of including the whole community acts as a guarantee that all citizens can contribute their own experience and views to the development of local educational policy.

Not only do elected school boards provide a more democratic structure for decision-making, they help ensure that the decisions themselves reflect democratic principles. Within their jurisdiction, they help guarantee that resources are directed to those schools and programs most in need, they determine what local programs are most appropriate, and they ensure that those programs are implemented equitably and in response to local conditions. Local government generally, and school boards in particular, provide an important model for grassroots representative democracy.

—Canadian School Boards Association

Education in Canada
[Cited November 22, 2002.] <www.cdnsba.org>.

Alberta’s School Act delegates a great deal of authority for the governance of education to locally elected school boards. As decision makers for public education, school boards serve a number of roles.

- School boards provide **leadership**.

They create a vision and shape local public education systems that meet the unique needs of the communities that elect them and the students they serve. As leaders and decision makers, they have the courage to question, debate, communicate and advocate in defence of the public interest.

- School boards provide **accessibility**.

They ensure that every student is well served. They provide a vital connection between parents, students, community stakeholders, provincial and municipal governments and local schools. They work together with government—and with other stakeholders in the learning partnership—to create excellence in public education.

- School boards provide **equity**.

They balance competing interests and ensure fairness in decision making.

- School boards provide **a voice**.

They are representative of and responsive to their communities. They hear the voices of everyone in the community—stakeholders, partners and government alike—and ensure a community perspective in decision making. In their dealings with the government, school boards are the voice of students, parents, property holders and the community at large.

- School boards ensure **transparency of process**.

They are clear about their roles and responsibilities, and their management processes are easily understood by all.

Governance by locally elected school boards is a fundamental strength of Alberta’s public education system.

- School boards are **accountable**.

Their mandate is to provide education to the students in their jurisdiction. They take responsibility for providing these services with the resources available to them. And they make decisions in the best interests of their students.

- School boards have **authority**.

Restoring to school boards a limited ability to tax reaffirms their responsibility and autonomy to make decisions that respond to local needs and priorities.

School boards are committed to working with parents and with the

Limiting school boards' authority limits their effectiveness.

Without natural person powers, school boards might be prohibited from selling or distributing technology on a for-profit basis.

They might be restricted in their ability to enter into long-term agreements that involve the construction of shared facilities.

They could not be party to *any* type of contractual agreement that was not specified in the School Act.

constituents of their communities—the 70% of Albertans who don't have kids in school—to create the best public education our province can offer. For school boards to be effective, they must be locally elected.

The Alberta School Boards Association believes legislative changes are needed to safeguard the rights and responsibilities of school boards and to provide more flexibility for local decision making.

Natural Person Powers

One area in which change is required relates to the concept of **natural person powers**. Under current legislation, school boards can only take action on

issues that are implicitly or expressly sanctioned by the School Act. This limits the powers of school boards and curtails their ability to respond to local needs and priorities.

The Alberta School Boards Association recommends amending the School Act to grant boards natural person power. This would give boards the authority to undertake any initiative unless it was *expressly prohibited* by the School Act. It would provide school boards with the autonomy to act and would give them the same decision-making authority as municipalities enjoy.

Natural person powers were included in Alberta's Municipal Government Act in 1994. Giving school boards natural person powers will maximize the ability of boards to respond to the communities that elect them.

Clarity of Roles

Achieving good governance depends on clearly articulating the roles and responsibilities of the various players in the learning partnership—from government to school boards, parents, teachers, students and the community at large.

For school boards to be effective, they must have the authority to manage staff and resources. Current regulations impede this authority and create the potential for conflicts.

The hiring of superintendents is an area of particular concern. Although school boards hire superintendents, their selection is subject to the approval of the Minister of Learning. Board decisions to extend superintendents' contracts of employment are also subject to ministerial approval. If the board and the minister should disagree, the superintendent is placed in an awkward position. Is his primary loyalty to the board? Or does he bow to the wishes of the minister?

Boards must deal with complex grant regulations in managing their operational funding. In some circumstances, the regulations are unduly restrictive. They impede boards' ability to manage their funds as efficiently as possible.

Dealing with these issues requires legislative review. The Alberta School Boards Association would be happy to work with the government in designing appropriate solutions. It believes that discussion and debate can only lead to a stronger, more effective education system.

Teachers and the ATA : Defining Their Role

I am indebted to my father for living, but to my teacher for living well.

—Alexander the Great, 346–323 BCE

I am not a teacher, but an awakener.

—Robert Frost, 1874–1963

As cited in *The Treasure Chest*, ed. Charles L. Wallis.
New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

For more than a century, Alberta’s teachers have helped to shape the future of our province. They have built that future in the classrooms of our schools, and we’re all the better for it.

For most of us, it was in school—under the guidance of our teachers—that we learned to get along with one another. It was there that we learned to be compassionate and tolerant, to celebrate the diversity of our world, and to work together to make it a better place. It was our teachers who showed us how to let our imaginations soar. They taught us to think and analyze and make decisions for ourselves. And they prepared us for the world of work.

We looked to teachers to provide us with a richness of experience—to help us read and write, to create, and to learn by doing. And we looked to them to provide us with the sports teams, debating clubs, glee clubs and drama productions that made school fun.

Getting back on track

Alberta’s school boards value teachers. We see teaching as a noble profession. We value the professional relationships we’ve enjoyed with the teachers in our jurisdictions. We believe that teachers do important work and that they should be well paid.

“We can do absolutely nothing without good teachers in front of our students.”

—Michele Mulder, President
Alberta School Boards Association

The recently imposed arbitration settlement has put significant pressure on school board budgets. School boards have compensated by adjusting their budgets. They’ve shifted funds from other priorities—like small classes and better learning

resources—to accommodate these imposed settlements.

The Alberta School Boards Association believes teachers *deserve* a fair wage that reflects the broadly defined professional role they serve in our communities. Our economy is strong and growing. Our GDP is the third highest in the nation. Wages have risen in many sectors, and our teachers deserve a share of the pie.

Paying teachers what they're worth attracts the best people to the teaching profession. It helps boards hire the best in the field—teachers who are well-trained, intelligent, creative and committed.

Paying teachers well is part of our role as responsible employers. But school boards have broader responsibilities too.

We are pledged to do our best for the children of the province; we are pledged to provide them with an excellent education. Meeting these responsibilities is a balancing act that depends on professional relationships—relationships in which all parties can be counted on to fulfill their respective roles.

A Teacher's Role

The professional relationship between school boards and teachers is at the heart of a strong public education system.

To protect this relationship, the Alberta School Boards Association is proposing legislative changes which outline the roles and responsibilities of teachers as *professionals*. At the same time, the ASBA acknowledges

"Alberta's GDP makes up approximately 12% of Canada's GDP, even though we have only 10% of the country's population."

-Future Summit Delegate Package
February 2002

that—in the wake of last year's labour dispute—the timing of this discussion is a sensitive issue for some boards and teachers. However, we believe it is in the best interests of the students we serve to have this discussion.

School boards value the contributions teachers make in the classroom and beyond—as developers of curriculum and resource materials, markers of provincial exams, mentors and trainers of new teachers, and providers of extra-curricular activities which enrich students' lives and help them become good citizens.

Although current Alberta legislation defines the role of teachers, this information is dispersed in multiple documents. In addition, some traditionally accepted teaching roles are not mandated in current legislation.

To address these issues, the Alberta School Boards Association recommends amending the role of the teacher as it is currently defined in Section 18 of the School Act. The proposed amendments serve a number of functions:

- They affirm that school boards value teachers and recognize the important role teachers play in achieving excellence in public education.
- They compile the requirements for teachers in one place.
- They provide a comprehensive description of the broad professional role Alberta teachers have held historically.
- They codify teachers' professional obligations with regard to extra-curricular activities, curriculum development activities and the mentorship of teacher trainees.

Details of the proposed amendments are outlined in the Alberta School Boards Association, *Proposed Amendments to Section 18 of the School Act*, November 2002, which is available on the association website at www.asba.ab.ca. Additional amendments deal with

- the skills required for teacher certification
- the teachers' professional obligations
- professional development
- student records
- teachers' responsibility to create a safe and caring environment, work cooperatively with other members of the school community and attend meetings upon request.

Unions and Professional Organizations

As guardians of public education, school boards are committed to building for the future. They are committed to working in the best interests of children—interests which must be defined by society as a whole.

There is no doubt that teachers, like school boards, believe in public education. But school boards have a single-minded mandate: to educate Alberta's children and promote excellence in public education. The Alberta Teachers' Association, on the other hand, has a two-fold mandate. On one hand, the ATA has professional responsibilities as defined by the Teaching Profession Act. On the other hand, it serves as the certified trade union for all teachers. The two aspects of ATA's mandate are not always compatible. Conflicts result from a lack of clarity between the role of the teachers' association as a professional organization and its role as a labour union.

Individual school boards hold a variety of perspectives on these issues; however longstanding Alberta School Boards Association policy guides the association to propose the following measures to address this concern.

A professional association can't be a labour union

Longstanding Alberta School Boards Association Policy 7.P.10 (revised in 2001) holds that the union function of the education profession should be completely separate from the professional function.

Why? Because teaching is a profession, and a professional association cannot play the role of a labour union. The concepts are mutually exclusive.

Alberta's school boards want a professional relationship with teachers. The respect awarded to professionals is earned by professional conduct. Alberta's teachers *are* professionals. Alberta's school boards expect the best from teachers because they know that professional teachers always give their best.

The Alberta School Boards Association urges the government to conduct a review of the current union-professional association structure to address this issue. Consultations should be designed with a view to creating a made-in-Alberta solution. All Alberta's learning stakeholders should have a voice in this discussion.

Membership should be optional

Alberta School Boards Association directive 7.D.05 deals with membership in the Alberta Teachers' Association. The ASBA proposes

amending the Teaching Profession Act so that membership in the ATA is optional, not compulsory, for certificated central office personnel who do not come under the collective agreement.

Excluding central office staff from the bargaining unit avoids conflicts of interest. It allows management staff to assist their employer—the local school board—in preparing for labour negotiations.

Local Issues, Local Solutions

Because school boards serve their immediate communities, they must have the authority to manage labour relations issues on a local basis. Local bargaining is responsive to local conditions, and it can lead to quick and amicable agreements. In addition, local school boards are well positioned to establish and maintain positive, constructive relationships with teachers.

Local bargaining cannot be effective when locally negotiated labour agreements can be overturned by a provincial union.

The Alberta School Boards Association recommends amending existing legislation to ensure that local boards and their corresponding teacher locals have the right to conclude, ratify and sign local agreements.

The association also recommends enacting legislation to restrict collective bargaining to matters of salaries, special allowances, sick leave and other benefits. In other words, the following issues should be off the table:

- role specifications of supervisory personnel
- provision of support services
- provision of classroom facilities
- classroom load
- issues relating to organization and management of the workplace

These matters should always be addressed by elected representatives of the community -school boards- through board policies and practices. Indeed, decisions in these areas are inevitably trade-offs between competing interests. Elected people must make these decisions as representatives of their communities.

Effective Management Practices

School boards need to have the right to hire, manage and discipline staff. Legislation is needed to give boards a broad range of disciplinary measures, including the ability to suspend a teacher without pay. Focused on the best interests of students, school boards must retain the unfettered ability to make management decisions in the best interests of students.

Current legislation concerning the discipline and termination of teachers should be reviewed. The review may result in amending or removing the Board of Reference process, which—in its current form—is time-consuming, costly and frustrating for school boards. At its extreme, the current reinstatement provisions may put students at risk.

Where school boards seek to exclude employees from the collective agreement, they should have recourse to the Labour Relations Board when an agreement cannot be reached. The Alberta School Boards Association believes that Section 96(2) of the School Act should be removed or amended.

The legislation should also provide remedies for misconduct related to collective bargaining disputes.

Preparing for the Future

Children come to school with diverse gifts and diverse needs. Alberta's school boards dream of a Kindergarten to Grade 12 system that gives all children the foundation they need to take the next step in their lives—whatever that may be.

The Alberta School Boards Association is committed to working with the government—and with parents, teachers and members of the

community—to promote excellence in public education and to build a foundation for the future.

The following publications are available by request or on the Alberta School Boards Association website at <www.asba.ab.ca>.

- A Review of School Board Operating Revenues and Expenses 1995/96 to 2002/03. Prepared by Dr. Russ Wiebe for the Alberta School Boards Association.
- *A Vision for Public Education*. Prepared by Alberta's education partners, including the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta Home and School Councils Association, the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents and the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta.
- Alberta School Boards Association Policy Handbook. Updated July 15, 2002.
- *Joint Property Tax Council Business Plan*. Prepared by the Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association.
- *Proposed Amendments to Section 18 of the School Act*. Alberta School Boards Association, November 2002.
- *Small Rural Schools: A Policy Perspective*. Prepared by Dr. Russ Wiebe for the Alberta School Boards Association, December 2001.
- Submission to the Financial Management Commission. Alberta School Boards Association, May 2002.
- Submission to the Funding Framework Review Committee. Alberta School Boards Association, January 1999.

The following publications are available on Government of Alberta websites.

- *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, February 2002. <www.learning.gov.ab.ca/nativeeed/nativepolicy/Framework.asp>
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