

Taking a comprehensive approach

Alberta's first review in over thirty years

Alberta's first in-depth examination of its education system in more than thirty years was launched in June 2002. Alberta's education system is known as one of the best in Canada and some would say it's among the best in the world. At the same time, much has changed in thirty years and, looking to the future, we can be almost certain that change will be a constant factor. The key objective, then, is to examine not just short-term issues and pressures in the system but to look beyond the hot buttons of the day and consider where our province and our society are headed and how we can make sure our education system is as responsive as possible. Most important, the key challenge is to ensure that Alberta's children and youth are well prepared for whatever their futures might bring.

The idea of reviewing the education system stemmed initially from the Alberta Future Summit. Education stakeholder groups also suggested that a comprehensive review would help guide plans for the future. When the Education Services Settlement Act was introduced in 2002, it included a commitment by the provincial government to launch a review of the education system.

From the outset, the review was designed to be comprehensive, forward looking, and to engage a wide range of Albertans. A nine-member Commission on Learning was established to guide the process and to prepare recommendations in seven broad areas:

- Ensuring excellence in the classroom
- Meeting the needs of a changing student population
- Facilitating smooth transitions into and through the system
- Focusing on results
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities and governance
- Providing responsive and relevant curriculum
- Building a sustainable and high quality system for the future.

Within the scope of those broad areas, the Commission was expected to address topics such as class sizes, pupil-teacher ratios, hours of instruction, supporting special needs students, curriculum development, the impact of globalization, technology, and changing demographics.

Specifically, the Commission's mandate was to "provide recommendations and advice to the Minister of Learning on ensuring a sustainable basic learning (Kindergarten to Grade 12) system that supports the lifelong learning needs of students and the societal and economic well-being of the province."





A comprehensive process unfolds

The review process was comprehensive, involving an extensive consultation process, public meetings, submissions and presentations, meetings with education stakeholders and experts, discussions with students, meetings with Aboriginal leaders, visits to schools, and a comprehensive research program. A list of the various organizations and individuals the Commission met with or heard from is included in Appendix 1.

This section provides highlights of the key themes and ideas presented to the Commission through its extensive consultations. Appendix 2 provides a summary of what the Commission heard through its consultation process as well as a summary of the responses to the Commission's workbook and the consultations with youth.

In addition to this final report, the Commission prepared an interim report. *The homework continues ...* provided an early summary of many of the issues that were raised during the consultation phase. The interim report was released by the Minister of Learning in January 2003.

Consulting with Albertans

In September 2002, the Commission began an extensive process to involve and engage Albertans in province-wide consultations. The process involved three key components:

- **Responses to the Commission's workbook**

A workbook was prepared providing background information, raising issues, and seeking people's views on a series of questions directly related to the Commission's mandate. People were able to respond either by mail or online. The response to the workbook was tremendous and thousands of completed workbooks were submitted to the Commission. A summary of the workbook responses is included in Appendix 2.

- **Public meetings**

To supplement the workbook process, the Commission held a series of public meetings in nine locations across the province. The public meetings were held between October 16 and December 3, 2003 and over 300 presentations were made. In addition, Commission members visited a number of schools across the province.

- **Submissions**

In addition to presentations, the Commission received written submissions from a variety of individuals and organizations.

Through the public phase of the consultation process, the Commission frequently and consistently heard that:

- Funding is viewed as inadequate
- After funding, class size is the most serious concern
- Schools need adequate resources and support beyond just money
- A strong and balanced curriculum is critical
- Teachers are strongly supported, but many are struggling to meet the diverse and challenging needs of children in their classes
- More support is needed to achieve the best results from integrating children with special needs
- Choice is a strength of Alberta's education system, provided it does not detract from a strong public education system.



“Alberta’s public education system currently shines brightly in Canada, North America and, indeed, on the world stage. Visitors come and marvel at our achievements. On the home front, however, there are some signs of discontent and doubt.”

College of Alberta
School Superintendents
(2002, p. 2)

Listening to education stakeholders and experts

A key component of the review involved listening to and learning from those who are directly involved in Alberta’s education system, including students, parents, teachers and school boards, superintendents and secretary treasurers, the Alberta Teachers’ Association, the Alberta School Boards Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Alberta Home and School Councils’ Association, other education stakeholder groups, representatives of private and charter schools, and members of faculties of education. The Commission also appreciated the tremendous support, ideas and extensive information provided by the staff of Alberta Learning and other government departments.

In addition, the Commission was fortunate to be able to meet directly with a number of people with experience in education as well as experts not only in the field of education but also in areas as diverse as early childhood development and finance.

In terms of the advice from stakeholders and experts, the most common themes were that:

- Alberta has one of the best education systems in the world. We need to maintain and strengthen the system at a time when it is facing a number of challenges.

- The education system needs adequate and predictable funding.
- Schools are suffering from “mandate creep” - being expected to meet a wide range of students’ needs that extend well beyond the education system.
- More attention should be paid to the early years so children come to school ready to learn.
- Without adequate support, there are serious challenges in integrating and providing appropriate programs for children with special needs.
- Class size is an issue but views on the best solutions differ.
- Roles, responsibilities and accountability should be clear for all those involved in the education system.
- Adequate funding needs to be in place to ensure that schools are properly maintained and regularly upgraded. Funding also needs to be available to build new schools where and when they are needed most.
- Teacher preparation and ongoing professional development are critical to continually improve Alberta’s schools.
- Steps should be taken to restore and maintain peace on the labour relations front.





Consulting with students

Because students are at the heart of the education system, the Commission was anxious to hear their views on a number of issues. To facilitate this process, an independent consulting company was engaged to organize and facilitate targeted consultations with a cross section of Alberta students. The objective was to get feedback from current and recent high school students about their experiences in school and their recommendations for the future of the education system. Over 100 students participated in sessions held in Grande Prairie and Calgary in addition to those who participated in the public consultation process and public meetings.

From the students who participated in these sessions, the Commission heard:

- More counsellors and better information are needed.
- Students want their teachers not only to know the subject matter but also to be passionate motivators.
- Changes are needed, particularly in the Career and Life Management course.
- Class size is a concern, particularly with the increasing diversity of students.

Consulting with Aboriginal leaders and community members

The Commission was particularly concerned about the education of First Nations and Métis children.

To identify the key issues and seek advice on priority actions to take, the Commission met with a number of First Nations leaders and education directors, representatives of the Métis Nation and Métis Settlements, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Alberta Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, and staff of Alberta Learning involved in Aboriginal education. In addition, the Commission also visited a number of schools for Aboriginal children.

Through these consultations, the Commission heard that:

- More study is not the answer - it's time for action. The First Nations, Métis and Inuit Policy Framework developed by Aboriginal representatives and Alberta Learning is a good starting point.
- Little real progress will be made until Aboriginal parents and community members have more responsibility and accountability for the education of their children.
- There are isolated examples of good progress, but overall, the results are simply not good enough.
- Better linkages are needed between schools and parents.
- More Aboriginal teachers are needed.
- Improving the outcomes for Aboriginal children will bring tremendous benefits not only to Aboriginal children, their families and their communities, but also to the entire Alberta society.

“Students care passionately about the state of their education system. In short, they expect the opportunity to learn the appropriate mix of skills and knowledge required to prepare for their futures beyond the classroom.”

GPC International
(2003, p. 21)



Undertaking research

From the outset, one of the clear expectations was that, to the extent possible, the Commission's recommendations would be guided by sound research. To tap into the latest trends and ideas and access the best available research, the Commission launched a comprehensive research program under the direction of a small research team.

Overall, roughly 400 articles, reports, studies and books were reviewed as part of the Commission's research program. A selected bibliography of the various articles, studies, and books reviewed by the Commission is included in Appendix 3. An independent review of the Commission's bibliography, undertaken by the Canadian Education Association, confirmed that the list of studies was comprehensive, current, and reflected reliable sources.¹

To the extent possible, the Commission used the best research available to guide its recommendations. In some cases, the research evidence simply was not available and the Commission relied instead on its own judgment and the best advice from education stakeholders, experts, parents, students, and other Albertans.

What did the Commission learn from the process?

While the issues and ideas were as diverse as the education system itself, the Commission certainly heard several clear and consistent messages through its consultations.

- Albertans are strong supporters of our public education system and want to see it maintained and strengthened. They see education as vitally important to the future of Alberta's children and our province and something that deserves the strong support of all Albertans.
- Alberta has an outstanding education system, but people are worried we may be losing ground.
- Money is an issue and most people involved in the education system feel that funding is not adequate to meet current demands and expectations.
- Class size is a serious concern, especially among teachers and parents.
- Teachers, principals, superintendents and all those who work with children in Alberta's schools need to be thoroughly prepared for their jobs. Ongoing professional development is critical.
- Support for educating children with special needs - both financial and professional - is not sufficient. More needs to be done to coordinate and integrate services for children, many of which extend beyond the responsibilities of schools.
- It's important to start early and take steps to make sure children are ready for school.
- The education of Aboriginal children is not working well and the result is too many children and youth are being left behind.
- No one wants to see a repeat of the turmoil and tension caused by the teachers' strikes in 2002.



Preparing recommendations

It was a privilege for Commission members to listen to the diverse views of Albertans and heartening to hear their strong support for education. The most difficult task for the Commission involved sorting through the wealth of ideas and information and developing recommendations for the future.

Throughout the process of developing its own recommendations, the Commission was guided by these criteria:

What good will come from this recommendation?

Will this be better for students?

Will this be better for the future of Alberta's education system?

The Commission was determined to keep its focus squarely on students and on the future. While many individuals and groups brought forward specific ideas related to short-term problems or issues, the Commission's view was that its primary responsibility was to take a longer term view - to step above the fray and to focus on the benefits that could come from focusing on students, first and foremost, and on setting a clear direction for the future.

